

Oregon's Statewide Textbook Affordability Program

Testimony for the House Committee On Higher Education January 31, 2023

Chair Lively, Vice Chairs Ruiz and McIntire, and members of the House Higher Education Committee, for the record, my name is Amy Hofer, Statewide Open Education Program Director with Open Oregon Educational Resources.

Open Oregon Educational Resources is our statewide textbook affordability program. We promote textbook affordability for community college and university students and facilitate widespread adoption of open, low-cost, high-quality materials. You can visit the openoregon.org website for more information showcasing what's happening across the state.

We have a problem: textbooks cost so much that students can't afford to buy them.

The cost of textbooks is a small dollar amount compared to the total cost of attendance. Yet research shows that seemingly small, unpredictable expenses can create a financial emergency that limits student success and increases student debt.

A recent survey of Oregon State University students conducted by Stefanie Buck found:

- 61% of the respondents do not purchase their textbooks because of high costs
- 44.5% took fewer classes, 18% have dropped, and 14% withdrew from a course
- Historically underserved students reported a greater impact of high costs.

There are many ways to address high textbook costs and today we'll focus on open educational resources (OER). OER are course materials where the content creator retains their copyright and also adds an open license giving future users permission to do the things that faculty like to do with their course materials. You have permission to download and save a local copy so that you're not depending on a third-party server for access; for students, the ability to keep a copy is

the opposite of a textbook rental. You also have permission to revise, remix, make a very accessible copy, make a translation, or make a local Oregon version of the materials. You have permission to share with others as long as you provide attribution back to the original content creator. This last permission is why OER are free online or in print at low cost. They save students money and also afford faculty the academic freedom to do the kinds of things they like to do with their course materials.

To give an example, Blueprint for Success is a remix created by Dave Dillon at Grossmont Community College that includes two Oregon authors, Alise Lamoreaux and Phillis Nissila from Lane Community College. It's the first openly licensed textbook to win the TAA award for excellence. Norma Cardenas and Linnea Spitzer at Portland State University did a review and released the Oregon edition last spring based on feedback from faculty and students for cultural relevance. Patricia Vazquez at Portland State University translated the Oregon edition into Spanish. All of these versions are available online for free and the print copy is ~\$15.

Here are a few more of the things that the statewide open education program does.

Oregon is a national leader in open education because of our well-developed community of practice around OER development and implementation.

We regularly offer professional development opportunities for faculty to learn about OER. One offering is the OER Review Workshop, where faculty have an opportunity to write an in-depth review of an OER that they might adopt in their course for a small stipend. We offer Equity & Open Education Faculty Cohorts, a model developed by Jen Klaudinyi at Portland Community College and now offered statewide. And save the date for our upcoming Virtual Statewide OER Symposium on April 28 - all are welcome.

We also offer policy support. Open Oregon Educational Resources works with each community college and university to implement legislative requirements and assess their impacts.

I'm going to show you a few of our direct program impacts, where program dollars spent result directly in student savings. Assessment of past OER grant cohorts shows that savings from the use of OER compound over time, as more students take the redesigned courses and faculty persuade their colleagues to adopt the OER. The estimated student savings from the current grant

cohort is close to \$1M, and when you look at the savings going back to the beginning of the grant program in 2015, you can see that it's nearly \$17M. Likewise, the estimated student savings per program dollar spent has a multiplier effect over time. Each dollar is spent one time but the impact continues to ripple forward.

We also have indirect measures of the impact of statewide investment in textbook affordability since 2015. Courses with the no-cost and low-cost designation in the schedule at 18 Oregon institutions represent student savings or cost avoidance of almost \$50 million during the 2019-21 biennium, up from \$34 million in 2017-19. At the reporting institutions, almost 20% of courses offered were designated no-cost or low-cost, up from 12% in 2017-19.

A first-of-its kind research study was conducted by the Program Director in collaboration with Jennifer Lantrip, Health Sciences Student Success Librarian, Pacific University and Shauna McNulty, Faculty, Umpqua Community College to determine whether the no-cost/low-cost schedule designation has an impact on student enrollment behavior. The answer seems to be yes, students are voting with their feet to find lower cost courses. Further, the designation is potentially helping historically underserved students lower the cost of attendance.

Between 2015-2021, our community colleges have significantly reduced the cost of course materials for two-year transfer degrees. Using the no-cost/low-cost schedule designation, it was possible to determine that the lowest-cost pathway through the AAOT degree requirements averages just \$204 in course material costs for a two-year degree.

We also now have 2021 data enabling a comparison against the benchmark data collected from the universities in 2019 where we are making progress in reducing the cost of meeting gen ed requirements and also creating low-cost pathways through gen ed requirements.

Looking ahead into the next biennium, the barriers to OER adoption are not very surprising: time and money.

To address these barriers, I'm recommending a program funding increase of \$4,558,400, bringing the funding level from \$669,200 to \$5,227,600 per biennium. This CSL increase addresses the state's current under investment in the statewide textbook affordability program and is aligned with the Joint Task Force on Student Success for Underrepresented Students in

Higher Education Affordability Work Group recommendation. Even though HECC is broadly supportive of the OER program, the funding request that I am presenting to you is mine, not theirs, as there is not currently a Governor's recommended budget.

From the student perspective, this investment would have several types of impact. Straight-line impact results directly in student savings through grant awards and stipends for faculty to adopt, adapt, and create openly licensed course materials that are available online at no cost or in print at low cost. Squiggly-line impact comes from large-scale projects ensuring that materials are not just affordable, but also high quality: relevant, aligned with course outcomes, accessible, and designed with an equity lens. Courses going through the Common Course Numbering process are great candidates for this type of work because they are going to have statewide shared learning objectives that we can design OER around. Last, dotted-line impact results from work where there may not be a direct feeling of cause and effect for students, yet course materials designed with an equity lens have been demonstrated to affect student sense of belonging and therefore retention.

This funding increase proposal is coming in a year where there's also a large financial aid increase request. These are both important to fund because they address the affordability of higher education from different angles. Compared with other ways to spend public funds to lower the cost of attendance, support for affordable course materials is effective and high-impact. Spending on textbook affordability has a multiplier effect such that each \$1 in state funding spent can save students from \$3-\$30, year after year. Financial aid rarely stretches to cover course materials, so funding for affordable textbooks is an essential component of a comprehensive statewide affordability strategy.

Thank you for your time!