OER MYTHBUSTING

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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INTRODUCTION

The movement for Open Educational Resources (OER) has grown exponentially across North American higher education. Recent studies have found that as much as a third of faculty now have some level of awareness of OER and that the trend toward OER adoption is growing. Yet despite this progress, some myths about OER still remain. Whether it is confusion over the meaning of open versus related concepts such as free or digital, or adherence to folk wisdom such as "you get what you pay for," there are many common misunderstandings about OER.

OER Mythbusting addresses the top seven myths about OER in North American higher education, as voted on my more than 100 faculty, librarians, students and other members of the OER community. This project grew out of a discussion during one of SPARC's Libraries and OER Forum monthly calls, where a group of librarians from the U.S. and Canada identified a need for better resources to address misconceptions about OER. A team of volunteers developed a poll and distributed it over email lists and social media over a two week period in July 2017. The results were then used to produce this collaboratively written document.

While OER Mythbusting is not intended to be a comprehensive catalog of all myths in all contexts, our hope is that it will provide a useful resource for both OER advocates and those seeking to learn more about the topic. We anticipate that this resource will evolve over time, as new myths emerge and old ones fade. To access the latest version of this resource, visit: sparcopen.org/our-work/oer-mythbusting.

OER (Open Educational Resources) are teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use and repurposing by others. OER include full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software, and any other tools, materials, or techniques used to support access to knowledge.

MYTH #1: OPEN SIMPLY MEANS FREE

FACT: OPEN MEANS THE PERMISSION TO FREELY DOWNLOAD, EDIT, AND SHARE MATERIALS TO BETTER SERVE ALL STUDENTS

Every day we encounter online resources that are free to read, watch, or listen to. However, there's a lot more to open than just being able to view something for free. Open means that users have the permission to freely download, edit, and share educational resources to better serve all students. Students can save copies of their assigned resources forever, and educators can tailor and update the content to meet course needs. While making resources free is a good first step, making them open taps into a world of possibility.

Here are some examples of how students and educators have benefitted from the permissions that come with open educational resources:

- Students and faculty at Brigham Young University took an [open licensed project management textbook](#) and revised and remixed it as part of the course assignment. This not only enhanced students' knowledge of the material, but also created an improved textbook for the next group of students in the course.

- A team of Canadian professors created a [Canadian version of an American open textbook in sociology,](#) adding in content and examples that are relevant in the Canadian context.

- Students who have completed any of the [Z-courses](#) at Tidewater Community College retain access to all of the course materials used during their studies. These students are able to refer back to these materials in their future studies and are therefore better supported on their path of lifelong learning.

MYTH #2: ALL OER ARE DIGITAL

FACT: OER TAKE MANY FORMATS, INCLUDING PRINT, DIGITAL, AUDIO, AND MORE

Most modern educational resources—from textbooks to lectures—start out as digital files before being converted into other formats including (but not limited to) print and audio. The same goes for OER. Most OER start out as digital, but can be used in a wide variety of formats for many different devices. For example, an open textbook can be printed, read on a screen, or heard through text-to-speech technology. The difference between OER and traditional resources is that students and educators do not have to choose between formats. With traditional materials, students often need to purchase print books and ebooks separately, and digital materials often carry an expiration date.

Here are some examples of how OER come in a variety of formats:

- Many open textbooks can be purchased through print-on-demand services made available by campus bookstores.

- OER can be viewed on a variety of devices, allowing students to simultaneously keep a printed copy at home, a mobile version to read on the bus on the way to school, and a browser-based version to read during class.

- OER can be legally converted from one format to another. This is especially helpful for campus disability services, who can create—and share—large print, braille, or audio versions of OER text without seeking any additional permissions.

MYTH #3: "YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR"

FACT: OER CAN BE PRODUCED TO THE SAME QUALITY STANDARDS AS TRADITIONAL TEXTBOOKS

In this increasingly digital and internet connected world, the old adage of "you get what you pay for" is growing outdated. New models are developing across all aspects of society that dramatically reduce or eliminate costs to users, and this kind of innovation has spread to educational resources.

OER publishers have worked to ensure the quality of their resources. Many open textbooks are created within rigorous editorial and peer-review guidelines, and many OER repositories allow faculty to review (and see others' reviews of) the material. There is also a growing body of evidence that demonstrates that OER can be both free of cost and high quality—and more importantly, support positive student learning outcomes.

Here is some evidence supporting the quality of OER:

- OpenStax—one of the most recognized open textbook publishers—created a library of 27 peer-reviewed, professional grade open textbooks for the highest enrollment college courses. These books are kept up to date through a centrally-controlled errata process, and a recent study found they have reached 10% market share in their subjects.

- The Open Textbook Library is a collection of over 400 open textbooks. Prospective users can read public reviews of the books written by faculty, which assess the text through a star rating and a ten-point rubric.

- Many peer-reviewed academic research studies have found OER support positive student outcomes. One recent study of ten institutions found that students who used OER tended to perform the same or better than their peers in terms of grades, course completion, and other measures of academic success.

Whether resources are open or closed, faculty are the best judges of quality because they know their students' needs.

MYTH #4: COPYRIGHT FOR OER IS COMPLICATED

FACT: OPEN LICENSING MAKES OER EASY TO FREELY AND LEGALLY USE TEXTBOOKS

OER carry the permissions for users to freely download, edit, and share the content to better serve all students. These permissions are granted by the creator of an OER through an open license—a legal document that informs users of their right to retain, reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute the work. Open licensing is a simple, legal way for authors to keep their copyright and share their work with the public under the terms and conditions they choose.

Creative Commons (CC) licenses are a set of standard open licenses that are used throughout the OER community. Materials licensed under CC licenses are easy to identify, clearly explain the permissions and conditions of reuse, and don't require any additional permission to use or adapt. To add an open license to a work, an author simply needs to include a copyright statement indicating that the resources carries a CC license, and include a link to the specific license.

Here are some ways to get support using CC licenses:

- Seek out the OER or copyright specialist at your library or institution to help.
- To select which CC license to apply to your work, use this license selection tool.
- When using CC licensed content, this attribution builder tool can help ensure you give proper attribution.

MYTH #5: OER ARE NOT SUSTAINABLE

FACT: MODELS ARE EVOLVING TO SUPPORT THE SUSTAINABILITY AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT OF OER

Everyone recognizes that it takes time and effort to develop high quality educational resources, and that there must be incentives and support models in place for OER to be sustainable in the long-term. Incentives take many forms. Non-monetary incentives include course release time or recognizing OER as a contribution toward tenure and promotion. Funding models include grants and up-front payments to authors to develop resources, which then become openly licensed. Commercial models are developing around important value-added services, such as professional development, curation, and customization. In fact, virtually all of the largest traditional publishing companies have launched services branded as OER.

Examples of models that support the sustainability and continuous improvement of OER include the following:

- Institutions such as UMass Amherst and North Carolina State have developed OER grant programs where faculty can apply to receive grants to adopt, adapt, or create free or low-cost alternatives to expensive textbooks.

- Lumen Learning provides for-fee training, technical support, hosting, and other services around OER and directs a portion of this revenue to the creation of new OER and the maintenance and improvement of existing OER.

- The University of British Columbia formally recognizes OER as a contribution toward tenure and promotion as part of its Educational Leadership Stream.

MYTH #6: OPEN TEXTBOOKS LACK ANCILLARIES

FACT: OPEN TEXTBOOKS OFTEN COME WITH ANCILLARIES, AND WHEN THEY DO NOT, EXISTING OER CAN PROVIDE ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

Instructors increasingly expect publishers to provide ancillary materials with textbooks, including lecture slides, images, videos, and homework platforms. This demand for ancillary materials is beginning to be met directly by OER publishers and commercial learning software companies who offer complementary products to open textbooks. There are also many repositories that hold openly licensed materials that can serve as ancillaries, including PowerPoint slides, videos, and simulations. Library staff can work with professors to help find these resources or share resources that other professors have already created. Teaching and learning staff on campus can also help with creating new ancillary resources.

Here are some examples of OER ancillary materials:

- OpenStax provides a free core set of ancillary resources available through its website for every book it publishes. OpenStax also offers a free OER Community Hub accessible on OER Commons that includes user-created videos, homework assignments, student learning guides, and course syllabi.

- Traditional publishers have increasingly begun to offer software homework systems, particularly in STEM fields. MyOpenMath provides an open source alternative used by hundreds of campuses.

- More than 200 institutions across the world have launched programs to encourage faculty to make curricular resources openly available, including ancillaries such as lecture notes, powerpoint slides, and assessments. MIT OpenCourseWare is a web-based publication of openly available MIT course content.

MYTH #7: MY INSTITUTION IS NOT READY FOR OER

FACT: ANY INSTITUTION CAN START WITH SMALL STEPS TOWARD OER THAT MAKE AN IMPACT FOR STUDENTS

Changing institutional culture to support OER can start small. A single faculty member can exercise their academic freedom by choosing to replace traditional resources with OER—whether it's a set of supplementary simulations or an entire textbook. In some cases, faculty members may be using OER without even knowing it. For example, many YouTube videos and Flickr images are openly licensed, and textbooks published by projects like OpenStax are used at literally thousands of institutions.

If it seems like your institutional culture at large is not ready, seek out individuals who have already taken steps in this direction. Talk to representatives within the library, teaching and learning centers, instructional design staff, faculty departments, student government, administrators, and campus stores about starting an OER taskforce or campus program. Together, your group of open advocates can meet and exchange ideas for organizing larger efforts on campus.

Check out these resources to learn what other campuses are doing on OER:

- Connect OER is a platform to share and discover information about OER activities at campuses across North America.

- CCCOER is a growing consortium of community and technical colleges committed to expanding access to education and increasing student success through adoption of open educational policy, practices, and resources.

- OER World Map shares information on behalf of the worldwide OER community, using local knowledge to describe the OER ecosystem.