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OhioLINK's Affordable Learning Initiatives – Making a Collaborative Commitment to Affordability for Students

Abstract

Since 2016, OhioLINK, Ohio's higher education library consortium, has defined affordable learning as a strategic initiative. Our affordable learning initiatives have evolved from advocacy and outreach largely around open educational resources to a multi-pronged approach that includes many different strategies for reducing the cost of course materials. At our recent Ohio Affordable Learning Summit, OhioLINK and its member libraries presented on a diverse array of strategic affordable learning initiatives and a menu of options that colleges and universities could choose from in order to pursue making learning more affordable. This second Ohio Affordable Learning Summit was an evolution from previous affordable learning events which intentionally divided efforts to promote open educational resources from efforts to negotiate with commercial publishers to provide deals on inclusive access materials. This year, OhioLINK combined the two and promoted a comprehensive affordable learning strategy led by our collaborative relationship with member librarians. If the goal is making college more affordable for students by reducing the cost of textbooks and course materials, OhioLINK, as a network of libraries, is well-positioned to promote many different paths toward that goal and to give librarians options as they work with faculty to find the best way to make learning more affordable.

Keywords

affordable learning, open educational resources, OER, inclusive access, affordable, affordability

From the Field

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Setting the Context

In 2016, OhioLINK, Ohio's statewide higher education library consortium, reached out to its member library deans and directors asking for suggestions about emerging demands that might be addressed at the statewide level. Library leadership expressed a need to address textbook affordability, and to explore how libraries and OhioLINK could lead on that issue. Both our members and our parent organization, the Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE), thus defined engagement with textbook affordability as a strategic initiative.

This feedback from member libraries also coincided with former Ohio Governor John Kasich's proposed initiative in 2017 that Ohio students should pay no more than \$300 each for textbooks, with colleges and universities expected to make up the difference. This proposal, ultimately withdrawn after statewide discussion and feedback, sent colleges and universities into action to figure out ways to reduce the cost of course materials for students. OhioLINK, as a state agency reporting to ODHE, was naturally positioned to take a leadership role in this facet

of affordable learning in the state and to mobilize librarians to join the cause.

The goal was to work with OhioLINK member libraries to take on the challenge of textbook affordability and move the needle towards a more sustainable affordable learning strategy for colleges and universities in which they had many different ways that they could tackle the problem. OhioLINK librarians at many levels and in many types of institutions have proven that our consortial tradition of collaboration and communication could be extended far beyond the confines of library material proper to create new opportunities for stakeholder engagement on campus while fulfilling the traditional role of helping students and faculty acquire and use curricular materials.

The Evolution of OhioLINK's Affordable Learning Strategy

OhioLINK developed a strategy that was multifaceted, based on a long history of determining different pathways that could work for different institutions depending on funding, staffing, faculty interest, and administrative support. The



first course of action was to build a team of champions to help support the affordable learning efforts led by OhioLINK. OhioLINK joined the Open Textbook Network (OTN) as a consor-tial member, and distributed an application to OhioLINK member institutions asking for lead-ers who wanted to help build affordable learn-ing efforts around the state. A team of nine highly-motivated and qualified individuals was selected from a geographically diverse group of institutions. The selected team also had different expertise – faculty, librarians, instructional de-signers – which brought a variety of talents to the table.

OhioLINK branded this group as Affordable Learning Ambassadors and based their roles on the OTN model. Broadly, this model consists of training presenters to deliver workshops to fac-ulty to introduce them to open educational re-sources (OER) and to encourage them to review an open textbook within the OTN's Open Text-book Library. As a member of the OTN, OhioLINK had the Affordable Learning Ambas-sadors trained to present the OTN faculty work-shops in Ohio. Leaders from the OTN came to Ohio to present their faculty workshops on the promotion and adoption of OER, and seven Af-fordable Learning Ambassadors also went to Minneapolis for training at the OTN Summer in-stitute in July 2017.

The Affordable Learning Ambassadors became the cornerstone of our affordable learning efforts during the first year. In Fall 2017 and Spring 2018, OhioLINK and the Affordable Learning Ambassadors hosted five OTN workshops for 131 participants from 57 different Ohio colleges and universities. Additionally, the Affordable Learning Ambassadors presented more than fif-teen smaller and more targeted Affordable Learning workshops at twelve different institu-tions. They continue to travel the state deliver-ing workshops tailored to the needs of individ-ual institutions. These needs have evolved as

OhioLINK institutions have become more famil-iar with OER and other affordable textbook ini-tiatives over the last three years.

Originally, OhioLINK focused on OER initia-tives, which had also been identified as a strate-gic direction by our member libraries. In this ini-tial stage, our libraries and ODHE drew on OhioLINK to support and organize advocacy and awareness efforts for OER, including the ac-tivities of the Affordable Learning Ambassa-dors. OhioLINK also promoted other member li-brary-led affordability efforts such as alt-text-book programs, which are usually characterized as having librarians help faculty members find “no cost to students” library materials and OER as replacements for textbooks.

OhioLINK stepped up to provide technology support and expertise for a \$1.3 million ODHE grant to create the Ohio Open Ed Collaborative. This initiative was funded to develop twenty-two course content packages using OER and other no-cost materials including shared OhioLINK library content in an effort to reduce the cost of textbooks for students in high enroll-ment courses. A feature of the grant from the be-ginning, arising from ODHE's previous experi-ence with OhioLINK as a leader in this area, was that librarians from the member institutions would be recruited and receive stipends for each subject content team in concert with the faculty that were to design the course packs. Thus, li-brarians were embedded into the project as an integral part of the grant design and OhioLINK handled communication and recruitment across the consortium for those filling those roles. Af-fordable Learning Ambassadors gave several types of workshops at the “bootcamp” kickoff events for each of the three faculty content co-horts.

The Affordable Learning Ambassadors also cre-ated opportunities for affordable learning advo-cates throughout the state to come together and share ideas and hear best practices from other



institutions that could then be translated to their own institutions. After attending conferences like OpenEd and the OTN's Summer Institute, the Affordable Learning Ambassadors felt that it was important for librarians and other affordable learning advocates in Ohio to have the opportunity to attend something similar without the cost and difficulty of having to travel and pay registration fees. From this idea, the Ohio Affordable Learning Summit was born.

After several months of planning, the Affordable Learning Ambassadors, OhioLINK, University of Akron, and the Academic Library Association of Ohio collaborated on a two-day summit at the University of Akron in early August 2018. The first day was entitled Affordable Learning 101 and was designed as a pre-conference workshop for people who had very little experience with OER and affordable textbook initiatives overall. Over fifty people attended this half day pre-conference workshop, which served as an excellent introduction for them to transition into the next day of content that was directed toward people who already had a basic understanding of affordable learning and were looking for some next steps. All of the Affordable Learning Ambassadors presented and helped to plan the event, which was attended by over one hundred participants from more than forty different colleges and universities. Feedback was very positive with ninety-five percent of participants indicating that they would attend a similar event in the future.

OhioLINK sought out other ways to affect the price of course materials in Ohio. In March 2018, OhioLINK announced to its members that it had negotiated with six major publishers to offer significant discounts on inclusive access eTextbooks to its members. The price agreements with Wiley, McGrawHill, Pearson, Macmillan, Cengage, and Sage were slated to result in savings of up to eighty percent on inclusive access eTextbooks, discounts on courseware, and a potential savings of up to \$35 million each year for

students in Ohio. This was a groundbreaking announcement for a library consortium. Inclusive access, sometimes called the "first day" model, is a model where all students enrolled in a class get immediate access to eTextbooks on day one of the course (or before) through the Course Management System (CMS). Students are automatically billed for those eTextbooks through the campus bursar.

To promote this opportunity and explain the process, OhioLINK hosted an Inclusive Access Immersion Event. Nearly 200 professionals from OhioLINK higher education institutions around the state joined together in Dublin, Ohio on September 28, 2018 for a one-day immersion of presentations and round table sessions. The nature of inclusive access requires a campus-wide implementation, so participants included librarians, bookstore managers, administrators, bursars, instructional designers, IT staff, and financial aid staff. A few institutions in Ohio were already piloting inclusive access for their students. These statewide leaders served as presenters and panelists for the rest of the community and provided practical advice and lessons learned to the rest of the audience. This immersion event served as a jumping off point for many institutions and as an introduction to this different textbook affordability option.

OhioLINK Librarians Take a Leading Role

Across the spectrum of these activities, OhioLINK's explicit strategy was to keep libraries front and center in campus conversations about affordable textbooks and course materials. On many campuses, it was the library and library staff who took a leading role in organizing not only OER and alt-textbook programs, but also became the drivers or critical partners for inclusive access textbook initiatives, working closely with bookstores, faculty, and administration to craft strategies suitable for their campus. Since many of these initiatives involve information discovery, provision and evaluation of



alternative materials, copyright information, and working across many departments on campus, libraries are well-positioned to offer those services and connections. OhioLINK's long tradition of sharing information and best practices between libraries was expanded to encompass wider campus networks, with library staff playing key roles.

It has become apparent to our community that many institutions find textbook affordability efforts to be most successful when they provide different options for faculty. Some faculty members are naturally drawn to OER, because of the inherent ability to customize and develop course materials so that they completely fit the instructor's course and teaching style. OER also has the benefit of providing course materials for students at no cost. On the other hand, scaling up to offer inclusive access across many courses can have an immediate impact for students across many disciplines and levels of courses at once. Materials created by commercial publishers come with all of the ancillaries that faculty are used to, are professionally packaged, and often have publisher support for limited customization. Instructors do not have to go through an extensive course revision process which is necessary when switching textbooks, whether to an OER text, library materials, or a different commercial text. Depending on the nature of the institution, its administration priorities, available support for faculty course revision, and faculty readiness, an institution may find it easier to adopt particular cost-saving or cost-avoidance textbook strategies in different phases.

The Ohio Affordable Learning Summit 2019: The Combined Approach

In 2019, OhioLINK decided to combine all textbook affordability efforts in one event. OhioLINK's goal is to provide librarians at our member institutions with different tools to help faculty find the best fit for them to lower the cost of materials for students. To provide a variety of

different strategies for our member institutions, we offered a two-day Ohio Affordable Learning Summit that encompassed OER programs, integration of library materials and workflows into textbook initiatives, and inclusive access textbook pilots and implementations across the state. This was in contrast to the two very separate events that we hosted last year.

This joint event was intended to show that these types of initiatives can coexist and support each other. They do not have to be mutually exclusive. Many times, OER and inclusive access are set up as two very different alternatives to the affordability problem, but one does not have to preclude the other. We wanted to showcase the exemplary universities in Ohio where libraries are leading efforts that combine these two approaches as well as other textbook affordability strategies.

Detailing the Ohio Affordable Learning Summit 2019

The Ohio Affordable Learning Summit 2019 was held August 1-2 at Ohio Dominican University. This institution was chosen because of its dedication to making affordability a campus-wide effort, its involvement in many OhioLINK affordability initiatives, and its overall leadership in the state. Over 145 people registered for the two-day event. In Ohio alone, thirty-eight different colleges and universities were represented including sixteen independent universities, twelve public universities, and ten community colleges. Four other statewide library consortia also sent representatives to the summit. This year we also attracted participants from different states, with Arizona, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania represented. This addition brought great perspectives and cross-state conversations that added to the benefits for all participants.

The two-day event kicked off with a keynote presentation delivered by Nicole Finkbeiner



from OpenStax at Rice University presenting practical and data-driven strategies for promoting the adoption of OER with faculty. She drew distinctions between direct tactics (talking with faculty individually, presenting at department meetings, and following up individually with faculty) and indirect tactics (creating a website, having a workshop with no follow up). She indicated that direct tactics are much more effective in getting faculty to consider adopting an open textbook for their course.¹ Her presentation was useful for everyone to hear, but it was particularly targeted toward librarians and those individuals on campus who help faculty choose course materials, and included actionable items that they could take away to improve their recruitment program.

Additional programming included panels from institutions with robust OER programs, an example of a marketing video created by a library-led affordable learning program, and eight breakout sessions designed to target specific OER and library-led affordability topics. The OER-focused day finished with round tables led by librarians, faculty, and instructional designers with expertise in the areas of marketing, statewide initiatives, publishing, copyright, and faculty recruitment. The Affordable Learning Ambassadors, again, were prominent in the programming and all presented and served as round table leaders.

The second day of programming focused on inclusive access. The day started with an update from OhioLINK Executive Director Gwen Evans on the status of inclusive access adoptions in Ohio since the introduction of the OhioLINK statewide deals. Since the start of Fall 2018, inclusive access adoption in OhioLINK member institutions rose by over 400%. Currently, inclusive access is being used for 981 courses at 53 different OhioLINK member institutions, and it is projected that more than 70,000 students will save more than \$10 million in textbook costs under these agreements.

The introduction was followed by panels sharing expertise in different areas of inclusive access implementation. Panelists from Wright State University, an early adopter of inclusive access, talked about ways to implement inclusive access across different offices of the university. Two students also spoke about the experience of using inclusive access texts in their courses. Ohio University panelists shared how inclusive access fits into their comprehensive affordable learning strategy, led by the library, which includes an alternative textbook program, OER initiatives, as well as inclusive access efforts. One panel that provided a unique perspective to participants was a group of commercial publisher representatives, which gave participants the opportunity to start an open dialogue with publishers and bookstore representatives. This panel gave publishers the opportunity to present their side of the process clearly and accurately and it gave faculty, administrators, librarians, and bookstores in attendance the option to ask questions and fully understand the process before making a decision. OhioLINK wants to present all of the options for making textbooks more affordable through a clear lens so that key decisionmakers have all of the information when deciding which option or options are best for their institution.

The two-day event closed with a panel focused on how to develop a comprehensive affordability strategy and lessons learned and questions to consider while doing so. All participants spoke about their individual experiences building coalitions and how they had worked on affordable learning at the institution or statewide level.

Moving Forward Post-Summit

The energy provided by the Ohio Affordable Learning Summit 2019 will serve to fuel OhioLINK's future affordable learning. Efforts to be diverse with our strategies will remain as we work toward further expansion of the OhioLINK Open Course Content Library



(OhioLINK's OER Commons microsite) to house OER content and continue to re-negotiate textbook deals for inclusive access – OhioLINK just signed the second round of price agreements with McGraw Hill, Macmillan, Cengage, Pearson, and Sage. OhioLINK's affordable learning website also highlights the work that is going on at individual Ohio colleges and universities, led by libraries, to advance affordable learning initiatives. In this way, librarians can peruse this information and then network with each other to find out what works and what initiatives should be implemented on their own campuses. Some upcoming goals include undertaking an environmental scan of the entire state's efforts and providing a template for metrics so that we can effectively track affordable learning efforts and outcomes. More accurate metrics will provide OhioLINK with the data needed to prove the worth of affordable learning initiatives. Working collaboratively with our OhioLINK member librarians, we will continue to lead the charge on promoting and developing affordable learning initiatives as the strategies for doing so evolve and change. We welcome the challenge.

¹ Finkbeiner, Nicole, "Effective Strategies to Encourage OER," Keynote address presented at the Ohio Affordable Learning Summit, Columbus, OH, August 1, 2019.

