Promising but tough road for OER degree pathways

BY ELLIE ASHFORD / MATTHEW DEMBICKI FEBRUARY 20, 2020   PRINT

A new study of an initiative focused on developing academic pathways for courses that use open education resources (OER) shows promising results for the programs, but they also face challenges in continuing.

In general, most colleges' OER efforts are for single courses and are not connected. But an initiative started by Achieving the Dream (ATD) nearly three years ago aimed to help community colleges build a cohesive set of courses that aligned toward a degree. The new study by SRI Education and the rpg Group examined the academic and economic effect of the OER Degree Initiative on the 38 participating community colleges and their students.

Overall, the effort did save money for students (about $65 per student, per course), improved their learning experience and was cost-effective for the colleges, the study says. Students who took multiple OER courses, on average earned more college credits over time than similar students who didn't take OER courses, it says. However, researchers caution that they weren't able to determine the factors for that, citing the sample of 11 colleges that fit the parameters to study this was possibly not large enough.

Transformational change

While most previous OER efforts were haphazard, the ATD initiative was all about "transformative change" at the institutional level that is "sustainable and scalable, and connected to student success goals," says ATD President Karen Stout. At the participating colleges, "OER became an integral part of the effort to serve students," she says. Faculty were involved in customizing instructional materials to make courses more engaging and relevant.

As a result, OER not only saved students money but "improved their learning experience," Stout says. OER also contributed to equity because students didn't have to wait for a financial aid payment to purchase a textbook, she adds.

A large investment

Aside from grant support for the initiative, participating colleges invested a substantial amount of their own resources both directly and indirectly through staff and instructor time to develop OER programs, the study says. Among five key partner colleges, the average cost was $576,000 (ranging from $300,000 to $1 million over the 2.5-year grant period). The study notes that some of the colleges expect to recoup their investment as students who took OER courses attempted more credits, which increased tuition and fee revenues. As enrollment in OER courses increased, per-student costs for providing OER courses decreased, it adds.

Over the course of the initiative, nearly 2,000 instructors offered more than 6,600 OER course sections, reaching 160,000 students, the study says. The average number of instructors teaching OER courses through the initiative increased from 10 to 42, and the average number of OER sections grew from 22 to 101. In addition, the average number of students enrolled in those sections increased from 564 to 2,425.

The effort also yielded substantial collaboration across departments and service offices, the study says.

A financial issue

More than 80 percent of participating instructors indicated that they would not return to traditional materials for the courses in which OER were used. However, there didn't appear to be as much confidence in the continuation of OER degree pathways. There was little evidence that most of the colleges implemented the degree pathways, the study says.

"The majority of students who were affected by the initiative took fewer than four OER courses over multiple terms," according to a summary of the study. "Few campuses put policies in place to facilitate enrollment in a sequence of courses in the targeted major, for example by scheduling courses in blocks."

Perhaps the 2.5-year period wasn't long enough for campuses to provide the structures for OER degree pathways, the study says, but researchers did note that instructors reported more barriers to OER course development over time. This suggests that available supports and resources may have waned as the grant period drew to a close, raising questions about the sustainability of those supports without external funding.

"In sum, it appears likely that many colleges will continue their OER programs, but not necessarily with a focus on OER degree pathways," the study says.

Funding for the initiative was provided by support from the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Ascendium Education Group, and the Speedwell and Shelter Hill Foundations.