

Making College Affordable *with* OER

INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO FREE COURSE MATERIALS ENGAGE STUDENTS AND FACULTY ACROSS MINNESOTA.

BY JAY WILLIAMS



HELPING STUDENTS OVERCOME THE BARRIER OF PAYING for textbooks is a priority at Minneapolis College, and Open Educational Resources (OER) are playing an important role. Students can access OER materials at no cost, and instructors can modify these works to customize course materials, as the creators of these resources have given permission for their work to be openly shared and modified.

Minneapolis College staff and faculty have worked diligently in recent years to reduce students' materials costs through OER adoption. The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system has supported this innovative work with \$60,000 in OER grants. The college used this funding to develop a pilot program to better understand how course materials costs impact student success and explore options for creating no-cost textbooks.

"This pilot program has been an effective catalyst in making significant progress to expand the availability of zero-cost course materials," says President Sharon Pierce. Increasingly, faculty are choosing openly licensed materials for their courses to help students save money and, therefore, persist toward achieving their academic goals.

The program also is helping the institution reflect the perspectives of underrepresented students. One OER grant funded the publishing of *Out from the Shadows of Minneapolis: Power, Pride, and Perseverance at a Northern Community College*, a literary anthology of student, staff, and faculty stories. The materials were released to the public under a Creative Commons license, which enables the free distribution of original work that would otherwise only be available under more restrictive copyright terms. In its introduction, English instructor Shannon Gibney provides context for the authors' content. "From diverse backgrounds and historically marginalized communities, [the stories] highlight the transformative role that education has played in their lives."

The editors' preface to *Out from the Shadows* affirms the importance of affordable course materials: "Minneapolis College most serves those students who are least likely to go to college. With three-quarters of the student body composed of those underrepresented in higher education, the hallways are filled with recent immigrants, those seeking to learn English, members of communities with the highest unemployment and incarceration rates in the state, veterans, those of low socioeconomic status, seekers of diversity, and those who wish to serve them. Collected here are their stories, stories of overcoming, coming up, perseverance, pride, and power in the face of depressed opportunity and systemic oppression." Several chapters focus on how higher education institutions and pedagogical practices can address often-overlooked challenges facing underrepresented students who strive to participate in mainstream society.

AFFORDABLE TEXTBOOKS BY THE NUMBERS

In a 2017 survey of Minneapolis College, students responded as follows to questions about course materials:

- » **98%** said it was very (88%) or somewhat (10%) valuable for course materials to be available at no charge
- » **91%** said getting course materials for the lowest possible price is extremely or very important
- » **60%** said having course materials available free and immediately had a large positive impact on their course success
- » **52%** said they signed up for fewer courses, didn't choose a course, or withdrew from a course due to textbook costs

OER represent a paradigm shift in accessing, producing, and sharing knowledge. These materials also help address the economic and social injustices faced by many students at open access colleges. *Out from the Shadows* is now being used in statewide administrator and faculty training to encourage the use and production of OER.

Several other initiatives are underway at Minneapolis College to continue reducing course materials costs. With system funding, faculty continue writing new OER content and conducting peer reviews of OER textbooks. The recent \$0 Course Materials Initiative saved students nearly \$48,000. Staff, faculty, and students on the Traditional and Alternative Educational Materials Committee are increasing awareness and availability of zero and low-cost course materials. Philosophy Department instructor Maran Wolston conducts seminars for faculty interested in using OER and implementing 'open' pedagogy. She focused her recent sabbatical on exploring options for a full two-year associate of arts degree with zero course material costs.

The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system continues to support the advancement of innovative strategies to reduce students' materials costs. It recently created and launched an online platform, Opendora, to enable the free distribution of OER for faculty to use at its 30 colleges and seven universities across the state.



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