

Tacoma Community College Open Education Project

Institution & Institutional Context

Tacoma Community College (TCC) is an urban two-year institution in Washington, in the United States. It is one of thirty-four community and technical colleges in the state. As a local, two-year college, TCC offers general education transfer degrees, as well as professional and technical programs leading directly to the workforce. “TCC has 37% part-time and 63% full-time students and 17% more full-time students than any other community college in Washington State. Students come to TCC to achieve a variety of goals, including: Academic transfer to a 4-year institution 57%, Workforce training 21%, Basic skills education 7%, Pre-college 15%.”(Quoted from the Tacoma Community College Website).

In addition, TCC’s student-body represents the diverse community in which it resides. According to the college demographics, listed on the website: “Nearly 14,000 students enroll at TCC each year. Gender: 61% women, 39% men, Median Age: 25.1, Ethnicity: 41% self-identify as students of color (59% white, 13% African American, 13% Asian/Pacific Islander, 10% Hispanic, 5% Other/Multi-racial), 519 International students, 650 students with disabilities”

As a community college, TCC’s purpose is to enrich the local community while providing increased choice for students and potential students. Access to education is a central part of the college mission. Early in 2011, textbook cost was officially recognized as a significant barrier to student success, and the institution began a plan to address the cost of traditionally published textbook materials.

Keywords and OEP themes

Student Voice; Institutional Strategy.
Sub themes: Lower costs access to education; Lower costs for students.

What is the case study about?

The OER Project at Tacoma Community College began with the simple premise that the cost of traditionally published textbooks has a negative impact on student success and retention. By using open education resources (OER) at TCC, instead of traditionally published materials, we planned

to lower textbook costs while maintaining or increasing student success and retention. Originally the TCC OER Project was planned as a two-year project that used institutional and student government funds to support faculty to adopt open education into ten of TCC’s most enrolled courses. Initially funds for the project were used to hire an Open Education Project Director and to pay for honorariums for faculty who adopted OER instead of traditionally published textbooks. The importance of an OE expert was quickly realized, as faculty sought out help to find and adopt open materials. The OE Project Director was a librarian, but she has strong training in instructional design, and experience in project management. These skillsets were uniquely supportive of OE adoption work.

What is the issue or need you are addressing?

At a time when the cost of tuition was increasing, more people were returning to school because of an economic downturn, and many students making difficult choices about how to fund their educations, our main goal was to cut student costs. However, we also have goals of integrating strong instructional design, professional development, and student success measurement as a process that leads to continual improvement of courses. Initially the project planned for two years of full-time open education support. However, a goal of institutionalizing the support for open education became one of our earlier goals. After initial funds were spent, at the end of

year two, a blended position of Instructional Designer and Open Education Coordinator was created as a way of sustaining institutional effort toward open education.

How was the initiative implemented?

The project began with hiring Quill West as the Open Education Project Director. Quill’s role was to promote open education, coordinate OE professional development activities, and invite faculty and students to engage in OE efforts. Much of the early work in OE at TCC revolved around finding key faculty members to adopt open education. However, as the project progressed, Quill worked with instructors such as Christie Fierro and Mary Fox to find students who would act as advocates for open education. Between professional practice, small honoraria, and student voice projects, TCC was able to integrate OE into 26 classes in two years.

Evaluation of success included student surveys, personal reflection on the part of instructors, faculty participation in two focus groups implemented by outside groups (the OER Research Hub, and the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges). As part of the course design and implementation process, faculty wrote qualitative assessments of how instruction changed when open materials were integrated. Plans have been laid for more extensive examination of student course completion data.

Outcomes

The biggest goal of the project was to save students money, which was represented in the Liberate\$250K campaign, which began in spring 2012. We pledged to save students \$250,000 on textbook cost. We were able to surpass that dollar amount in six months. After saving a significant amount of money, we launched “The Liberated” campaign, where students shared their stories about how OE courses changed their learning and experience of their institution. The result of that was The Liberated Blog (tacomacc.edu/open), a video where students described how they felt about open materials, and a growing student interest in the open movement at their institution. Further outcomes and plans can be found via the Annual Report from 2012/13.

Issues & challenges

Challenges to the OE Project included faculty resistance, time limitations, and long-term institutionalization. Some issues, such as resistance, are ongoing. However, it is a strategy of the project to invite faculty to participate, and to work only with enthusiastic people who want to adopt open materials. If people were particularly resistant, no pressure was placed on the faculty, however there is no real way of measuring how resistance from a prominent faculty member might have affected another person on adopting, or not adopting, open education.

Time limitations and long-term institutionalization are better addressed by the second iteration of OE at TCC, because there are now development funds and an ongoing position to support OE adoption. Time limitations will remain a challenge, and the institution has had to manage expectations around speed of adoption in relation to other responsibilities of faculty and staff.

Insights and Recommendations for National and/or Institutional Development

While national policy is an effective tool for asking institutions to consider open education, particularly when open licensing is tied to grants and funding, more extensive

work needs to be done on local policy. One thing that the TCC project didn't do, but should be working toward in the future, is policy work that supports open education adoption institution-wide. Adoption of OE was often an individual choice made by key faculty members. Examples of policies that should be addressed locally are: Tenure and Promotion, Accessibility and OE, Departmental Textbook Adoption, Review of Open Courses, Intellectual Property and Copyright Policies, and any professional development practices that might affect OE adoption.

Open education is an ongoing institutional investment, and integration of OE into long-term planning is necessary. It helps to have a centralized core of individuals who support open education development and planning at the institution. This group should also consider partnerships outside of the institution, such as grant opportunities, that will grow the resources and reporting abilities of the institutional project.

When single time funds are associated with OE adoption, institutions should make an effort to describe how the ongoing support of the open materials is considered before funds are expended. TCC has decided to devote ongoing course development fees into open course design, so that open courses can be revised on a regular basis.

Outreach to the larger OE community, such as the OE Consortium is a necessary part of an OE project. As the project develops, and champion faculty members who will serve as OE advocates are identified, many institutions might want to invest in bringing those individuals into the international OE community. Faculty developers who get to present about their work are more dedicated to OE and are more likely to participate in OE leadership at the local level. This has the added benefit of fostering a community of practice, and encouraging early adopters to become leaders in their own right. The current OE Coordinator at TCC is an early adopter who has become a powerful OE leader through her work as a faculty member.

Student involvement in OE development is also a necessary part of the process. Students are the best advocates, and they can be helpful in assessing open materials.

Students who responded to a qualitative assessment reported that they studied differently with open materials. The types of studying students described when considering their open courses fit more closely with the TCC institutional mission. Having student voice describing their learning process helped to bolster support for OE amongst institutional leadership.

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