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Libraries and Open Educational Resources: Why Libraries? Why Librarians?

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Libraries and Open Educational Resources: Why Libraries? Why Librarians?

Keywords

open educational resources, OER, open education, scholarly communication, open knowledge, copyright, open pedagogy

Disciplines

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SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION LIBRARIANSHIP

AND OPEN KNOWLEDGE

MARIA BONN, JOSH BOLICK, AND WILL CROSS, EDITORS

SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION LIBRARIANSHIP AND OPEN KNOWLEDGE

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WILL CROSS, EDITORS

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LIBRARIES AND OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

SUBSECTION 2.3.2.1

WHY LIBRARIES? WHY LIBRARIANS?

Regina Gong

As you learned in subsection 2.3.1.1, “Introduction to Open Education,” open education is part of the broader movement to democratize education.¹ With its underlying values based on the principles of “access, agency, ownership, participation, and experience, open education has the potential to become a great global equalizer.”² Similarly, open educational resources (OER) have the potential to provide broader access to higher education and to significantly improve the learning experience of students and globally diverse learners. In this section, you will learn the vital role that libraries and librarians play in leading an OER initiative and why it is imperative that we get institutional support and buy-in to advance the goals of open education.

At their very core, academic libraries are diverse knowledge ecosystems that provide a wide range of services and resources to the university writ large. Because of this, libraries play a significant role in supporting the teaching, learning, research, and outreach mission of their institutions. Engaging in open education initiatives is a natural fit because of the alignment between the library’s core values of providing free and equitable access to information and its fundamental principles of access, agency, ownership, and the affordability benefits inherent in OER. An advocate for access to information and a key campus player in student learning, academic libraries are an essential partner in OER initiatives and a potentially powerful voice for more affordable learning resources.³ Libraries and OER share commonalities because both emphasize removing barriers to knowledge and resources. Kleymeer, Kleinman, and Hanss make a case for their synergy:

Academic OER initiatives and university libraries share a determination to improve access to all kinds of scholarly and educational materials, both on their campuses and throughout the world. Given those dovetailing values, partnerships between OER initiatives and libraries seem not just logistically convenient but philosophically obvious.⁴

In addition to this philosophical convergence, there are two key advantages that many academic libraries can offer, which an OER initiative needs: infrastructure and relationships. When we talk about library infrastructures, these refer to existing assets that could potentially benefit OER initiatives, which include search and discovery capabilities, copyright expertise, data storage, metadata and indexing, institutional repositories, and preservation.⁵ Since OER adoptions take place in academic departments, OER initiatives that are acting as stand-alone units without library involvement might be duplicating infrastructure and consequently may be missing opportunities to use the library's existing and proven systems.⁶ With regard to relationships, libraries have “a central and trusted position in the lives of faculty, students, and administrators on their campuses.”⁷ And despite the changes brought by technology and the broader and unmediated access to scholarly and educational content online, libraries are still as relevant as ever. Librarians can offer their skills and expertise in outreach and education, curriculum development, and instructional support, all of which could benefit OER programs.

LIBRARIES AS LEADERS IN OER

We have so far discussed the alignment between the core principles of open education and the library's values. Bell also mentions the alignment between the open access (OA) movement and OER, which both put “academic libraries on a trajectory to build cultures of openness at their institutions.”⁸ The institutional-level leadership in open education that libraries provide to support the strategic goals of affordability, access, equity, and student success makes them ideally suited to spearhead OER programs on college campuses. We can see the crucial position and transformative influence of OER on the future of academic libraries in reports published by professional and educational organizations. An example is the biennial report by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) “Top Trends in Academic Libraries,”⁹ which reviews the top trends in higher education as they relate to academic libraries. Due in large part to the proliferation of OER programs in college campuses and the libraries' leadership in these initiatives, textbook affordability and OER made the list both in the 2016 and 2018 reports. In addition, the *2020 EDUCAUSE Horizon Report* has named OER as one of the emerging technologies and practices shaping higher education.¹⁰

The proliferation of OER is a “disruptive innovation that many instructors embrace for ethical, practical, and financial reasons, with the financial reasons often spearheading such experiments.”¹¹ Due to a strong connection between the benefits of open education and the mission of libraries, it is not surprising that libraries are involved in a wide range of OER and other textbook affordability initiatives. Most OER programs initially start with the goal of eliminating barriers to cost and improving access to educational materials as a way to address the textbook affordability crisis that college students have been facing for decades. Removing the cost and access barriers associated with traditional course materials has been the primary drivers for implementing an OER or affordable textbook programs on many campuses. Library strategies toward achieving these goals usually combine the use of open textbooks, freely available online materials, library-subscribed or purchased e-books, and textbooks on course reserves. This strategy leverages the investment libraries make in their collections and allows faculty to redesign courses based on free or more affordable options if open textbooks are not available. However, as you have learned in section 2.3.1, “Introduction to Open Education,” the benefits of OER extend beyond affordability and access. Because of the flexible nature of OER enabled through the freedoms brought about by open licenses, these materials can be modified and adapted to meet students' unique learning needs.

Library-led OER projects have focused on making content that supports existing traditional forms of instruction openly and freely available. In these projects, the power of the internet is used to overcome barriers to access by serving as a medium for freely distributing content. Making existing content available in this way is based on the revolutionary idea that education and discovery are best advanced when knowledge is shared openly. These OER projects have enabled a great leap forward in democratizing access to educational materials.¹²

It is also important to note that academic libraries are not just leading OER programs in their own institutions. Several libraries have assumed leadership roles at state and national levels to promote OER, providing support and professional development to faculty and making business case arguments for the use of OER in improving college affordability and student success. These are essential activities for libraries, both for the successful proliferation of OER use and for demonstrating the value of libraries to their institutions.¹³

Examples of state OER programs led by libraries:

- *OpenOregon Educational Resources* (<https://openoregon.org/about/>)—Provides training, webinars, consultations, and technical infrastructure needed to help educators in the state to engage in the adoption and creation of openly licensed materials.
- *Private Academic Library Network of Indiana* (<https://www.palni.org/about-palni/>)—Provides training and professional development to the member institutions of PALNI to raise awareness on scholarly communication issues including open access and OER.
- *Affordable Learning Georgia* (<https://www.affordablelearninggeorgia.org/>)—An initiative that promotes the development and use of OER through statewide grant funding and professional development and training resources that are open to all.
- *Affordable Learning PA* (<https://www.affordablelearningpa.org/>)—Supports a robust OER community among campuses in Pennsylvania for the creation and use of open textbooks and other related educational resources. It is a grant-funded project made possible in part by Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funds from the US Institute of Museum and Library Services and the Office of Commonwealth Libraries, Department of Education, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

It's clear that librarians and libraries are essential leaders and partners in promoting and supporting OER.

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF LIBRARIANS

As libraries continue to engage and support open education initiatives, the nature and scope of our work have changed and evolved in response to the unique context of our institutions. Discussions about how librarians might engage in OER have their beginnings in the 2009 ACRL/SPARC forum at the ALA Midwinter meeting, where leading experts convened to talk about what might be some opportunities for librarians in this area.¹⁴ In summarizing the recommendations of the panel, Belliston states that “Librarians can help by contributing their own OER to the commons; screening for, indexing, and archiving quality OER; using OER in their own teaching; and participating in discussions leading toward responsible intellectual property policies and useful standards.”¹⁵

As a growing number of librarians become heavily involved in OER initiatives, their roles have expanded in areas such as advocacy, promotion, and discovery; evaluation, collection, and preservation; curation and facilitation; and funding.¹⁶ Other areas where the library might be involved are in resource description, classification, management, dissemination, intellectual property and licensing rights, use, creation or repurposing of OER,

search engine optimization, e-learning, and content management tools.¹⁷ And as libraries increasingly engage in OER publishing efforts, librarians have also become an invaluable source of support for open textbook publishing, project management, instructional design, and user experience, and as a resource to enable faculty to engage in open educational practices.

We will discuss in more detail the work involved in each of these areas, the various OER services that libraries provide, and the day-to-day work of librarians in the next two subsections. But for now, we will look at the expertise we bring to an OER initiative so we can make a case for librarians as not only allies but as partners and leaders in building and sustaining an OER program.

LIBRARIAN EXPERTISE

One of the distinctive strengths that librarians bring to any organization is our “broad and deep knowledge of the ecosystems of research and scholarship.”¹⁸ This comes from our expertise honed from our LIS education, ongoing professional development, plus our practical experience working with library colleagues, faculty, students, and other academic staff on our campuses. Not only is our professional training and expertise an ideal fit for open education leadership, but more importantly, our work directly supports the teaching and learning missions of our institutions. Many librarians have liaison responsibilities that enable us to collaborate with faculty from different academic departments. We can certainly capitalize on these existing connections and relationships in our role as open education advocates. The report from the Library as Open Education Leader (LOEL) project makes a compelling case for librarians and why we are particularly suited to do this work:

To be an academic librarian is to be a leader in instruction, a student advocate, a faculty advocate, and a generalist with the ability to specialize enough to serve the needs of the student or faculty member when needed. Librarians can help to locate and organize OER, but they can also navigate copyright concerns, advise on open licensing, and support instructional design around the use of open materials. Librarians are natural open education advocates because they are most often trusted by the majority of people. The role of the advocate is to support the overall goals of exemplary learning experiences and equity of access to education. As a librarian, you are particularly suited to this work because you have probably been doing it for your entire career.¹⁹

The excerpt above suggests that we can leverage our existing skills and competencies in support of open education. Given that OER work is always a team-based approach, there is a range of expertise each librarian can bring to the table that intersects with our job responsibilities and roles. Cross identifies the librarian expertise and roles for building and developing an OER,²⁰ and though not exhaustive, table 2.8 might provide us with a general sense of what it entails.

So far, we have seen how library involvement, support, and participation are crucial to the success of any open education initiative. Indeed, librarians are not just allies and advocates but critical partners and collaborators in advancing education that is accessible, equitable, and more open for all.

TABLE 2.8
Librarian roles and expertise.

Type of Librarian	Expertise	Role
Collections, acquisitions, and subject specialist	Acquisition, collection development Table, relationship building	Content licensing, negotiating usage, customizing materials
Reference and instruction	Identifying materials, instructional design, information and digital literacy	Course design, content discovery, teaching and pedagogy support
Special collections	Preservation, rare materials, exhibits	Locating unique materials, sustainability
Digital management/digital curation	Web design, hosting, streaming media, learning management platforms, user experience	Creating digital materials, web hosting, open textbook publishing, authoring and annotation tools
Scholarly communication	Open licensing, fair use, copyright, data management, institutional repositories	Using 3rd-party systems, incorporating open materials into courses, accessibility

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

- Association of College and Research Libraries. “Top Trends in Academic Libraries: A Review of the Trends and Issues Affecting Academic Libraries in Higher Education.” 2020—*College and Research Libraries News* 81, no. 6. <https://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/24478>.
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