

Tech Snacks: Open Educational Resources (OERs)

What are OERs?

Open Educational Resources (OERs) are educational materials that are openly licensed and free to download and use. The “Creative Commons BY” license, the most common license for OERs, specifically gives educators and learners the rights to retain, revise, reuse, remix, and redistribute an OER text so long as the original authors are credited.

Why OERs?

Student Costs

Today’s college students shoulder a significantly heavier financial burden than previous generations. For us as faculty and staff, that means our own recollections of being a student may be a poor heuristic for estimating the financial burdens of modern students.

- According to the [SHEF website](#) (State Higher Education Finance), In 1985, [Montana appropriated \\$10,745 per FTE to public higher education](#)—on par with the national average. In 2024, public institutions in Montana had \$7,720 in education appropriations per FTE, approximately 66% of the U.S. average.

National and regional research on college student wellness converges on several relevant characteristics of modern college students.

- Roughly 1 out of 4 of your students likely experiences food insecurity, meaning that in the past year they worried their food would run out before they got money to buy more food. ([MUS Healthy Minds Study](#), 2024; [Hope Center/NCES analysis](#), 2023; [Trellis Strategies](#), Fall 2024)
- Roughly 1 out of 10 of your students likely experiences housing insecurity, meaning in the past year they worried about not having stable housing. (Ibid)
- 23.7% of Montana students surveyed (N=2064) reported that their finances negatively impacted their academic performance (defined as negatively impacting their performance in a class or delaying progress towards their degree). 59.5% of Montana students surveyed reported having financial problems in the past year. Of those students, 80% reported their finances caused them moderate or high distress. (Source: OCHE’s Associate Director of Student Wellbeing, Amber Spring, shared these stats from the American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment III (NCHA-III), which was

administered to the Healthy Colleges Montana Statewide Consortium campuses in spring, 2023.)

Students worry about not having enough money for things like food, housing, gas, medical needs, and childcare—expenses they often prioritize over buying a textbook. The wellness of students, including financial wellness, has academic consequences.

- The [Hope Center's research](#) consistently connects student wellness, e.g., financial insecurity, to lower GPAs and less retention, completion, and degree attainment.
- According to a [report from U.S. PIRG](#), 63% of U.S. college students admit they've skipped buying an assigned textbook due to cost. 17% report not buying an access code for publisher eBook/curricula, which can mean missing assignments and exams due to lack of access. Of those students who decided not to purchase a textbook, 90% said they worried the decision would negatively impact their grade.
- Students spend time working instead of studying. According to a [Trellis Strategies Report](#), about 2 out of 3 college students work a job while attending college. Of those who work, 43% work full-time, and 25% hold down more than one job.

How might a free, digital OER textbook help address academic outcomes?

- All your students can afford the textbook; it's free to download.
- All students have the text from the first day of class—no more waiting for financial aid or Amazon delivery.
- All students are using the same version of the textbook.
- For some of your students, saving the cost of a textbook might mean being able to pay an important bill, buy gas to come to campus, or have enough food to last the month.
- [The impact of open educational resources on various student success metrics](#), a large-scale study by AAC&U in 2018, concluded that “OER adoption does much more than simply save students money and address student debt concerns. OER improve end-of-course grades and decrease DFW (D, F, and Withdrawal letter grades) rates for all students. They also improve course grades at greater rates and decrease DFW rates at greater rates for Pell recipient students, part-time students, and populations historically underserved by higher education.”

Faculty control

Adopting an OER doesn't just help students. In practice, the rights to retain, revise, reuse, remix, and redistribute the textbook mean the following benefits for faculty:

- Version control. No more revising your syllabus and/or curriculum when the publisher decides to rearrange the text in order to sell a new edition.
- Revise / adapt the text's content or structure to better fit your course.

OER-Enabled Pedagogy

OERs unlock engaging, potentially AI-resistant, teaching and learning practices.

- In his article, "[What is Open Pedagogy?](#)," David Wiley discusses engaging students by ditching "disposable assignments" for activities in which students can act as real-world knowledge contributors.
- [Wiki Education](#) is a free (donor-funded) platform and service for college-level teaching in which students contribute to Wikipedia articles. Although not strictly OERs, Wikimedia content is also openly licensed and gives students the chance to contribute knowledge in the real world. Wikimedia also has some timely benefits related to generative AI: First, Wikipedia has banned AI-generated content from being used in "Talk pages" and in the creation of new Wikipedia articles. Second, Wikimedia is supported by a community of users that actively police content and enforce guidelines. Third, Wiki Education staff, along with AI detection software, work to identify and remediate AI-generated content.

What about quality?

- **Expert authors:** The vast majority of OER textbooks are authored by faculty experts, often as a result of grant funding.
- **Faculty Reviewed:** Most OER repositories support user reviews. For instance, 70% of textbooks in the Open Textbook Library have been reviewed by faculty experts using a structured evaluation rubric.
- **Accessibility:** The Open Textbook Library and BCCampus allow you to filter for accessible texts, and OTLE can assist you in evaluating the accessibility of an OER before adoption.

A word on "open-washing"

Some for-profit textbook publishers will offer OERs as a "freemium" marketing strategy, but will charge students to enable certain features. According to the Open Textbook Library, these "open-washed" OER textbooks often don't result in significant cost savings for students.

How to start using an OER?

Start by browsing the following OER repositories for textbooks in your discipline.

- [Open Textbook Library](#) is supported by the University of Minnesota and focuses on textbook curation. It currently houses nearly 1800 textbooks.
- [BCCampus](#), BCcampus hosts over 400 open textbooks developed with funding from the British Columbia provincial government, many of which have been reviewed by BC faculty.
- OER Commons and Merlot II are repositories of all types of OER—not just textbooks. Quality will vary.
- [Trails Montana](#), Treasure State Academic Information & Library Services, TRAILS is a dynamic statewide consortium uniting 25 of Montana's public, private, and tribal community colleges and universities.

If you're interested in taking a deeper dive into OERs, check out the [MSUN OER Libguide](#) at the Vande Bogart Library, or come visit us at OTLE!