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11-17-2023

University of Northern Colorado Case Study: Equity Through OER Rubric Pilot Project

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Equity Through OER Rubric Pilot Project

University of Northern Colorado Case Study

This case study describes our engagement with the rubric in the service of our institution's goals to advance equity through OER, and equity more broadly. Our case study includes reflection on the pilot project process, challenges and successes, and lessons learned.

November 17, 2023

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Introduction: Our Pathway to the Rubric

Our Project Why

After attending the Driving OER Sustainability for Student Success (DOERs3) Equity through OER rubric pilot project presentation by Dr. Liliana Diaz Solodukhin at the May 2022 Colorado OER Conference in Denver, we made the decision to apply to pilot the rubric at our institution. Since 2018, the University of Northern Colorado has gained momentum in our use of open educational resources and affordable practices for students, thanks in large part to efforts by [UNC's Affordable and OER \(AOER\) Committee](#). We realized we had not yet had in-depth discussions of how our AOER initiatives intersect with equity, and that our grassroots initiative, while successful, needed an assessment and a longer-term plan in order to move forward and evolve. Our hope is that our work creating a DOERs3 action plan will solidify connections between OER and equity on our campus and ensure that concepts of equity are integrated into our OER initiatives. We equate using OER to equity work and we want the connection between equity and OER to be clear to our campus community and show how the OER work we do benefits students and instructors. We believe the following objectives for action, assessment, and continual improvement are attainable within the timelines presented in our DOERs3 Action Plan.



Structure and Size

The University of Northern Colorado is a public doctoral research and educational institution that has about 9,000 students and more than 200 undergraduate and graduate programs, many of which are nationally recognized. Founded as a teacher's college in 1889, we have graduated generations of educators, more than any other Colorado university. Our culture is marked by academic excellence in education, health sciences, and the performing and visual arts. There are approximately 686 faculty, of whom 441 are full-time.

Organization

The university has a nine member Board of Trustees. The President reports to the BoT and has the following [direct reports](#): The Provost and the following Vice Presidents: Finance; University Advancement; General Counsel; Student Affairs and Enrollment; Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; and Athletics. The Provost has the following [direct reports](#): VP for Academic Resources and Planning; AVP for Undergraduate Studies; AVP for Student Academic Success; Academic Effectiveness; AVP for Research/Dean of the Graduate School; six Deans; and the Directors of Extended Campus and Global Engagement

There is an active [faculty senate](#) body, a [classified staff council](#), and a [professional academic staff council](#).

[UNC has eight cultural and resource centers](#) which provide tailored support to students in a community-based environment.

Campus Culture

Highlights of UNC's campus culture include:

- A strategic plan, Rowing not Drifting 2030, that has a "students first" focus
- A Vice President who oversees the Division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)
- Recognition as a top university for social mobility that proudly serves the more than 40% of UNC undergraduates who are the first in their family to attend college
- Recognition as one of 40 universities named Best of the Best LGBTQ-Friendly Colleges & Universities of 2022, based on the Campus Pride Index
- Faculty who have the freedom to develop their own course curricula
- Accessible leadership and strong faculty and staff self-governance
- Encouragement for creative solutions in problem-solving
- Collaboration and inclusivity

Results from the 2023 campus climate survey show that

- Faculty generally respect each other and are satisfied with department leadership and women's representation (all over 75%)
- Faculty would like to be more involved in decision making



- Staff believe supervisors care about their well-being (92%) and support their professional development
- Staff would like more flexible work schedules
- Students feel supported and like interacting with faculty and staff
- Many students (50%) report having a mental health issue
- First year and transfer students take longer to graduate because of transfer credit issues

Strategic Goals

- The university's strategic plan, [Rowing Not Drifting 2030](#), is currently in Phase III.
- The [Student Enrollment Management Plan](#) co-chairs solicited specific tactics for SEM goals and strategies during fall 2023.
- UNC is an emerging Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and has an [active steering committee](#) pursuing servingness beyond the "just a percentage" designation.
- UNC expects to obtain Research 2 (R2) status in the next round of classification. UNC currently has a Carnegie classification of doctoral/professional university (D/PU).

Challenges

UNC faces similar challenges encountered by many other public universities. These challenges include shrinking enrollments, how to evolve to serve a diversifying student body, administrative and employee turnover, and a lack of robust state funding.

In spite of these challenges, as a university in the state of Colorado, we are allowed to use terms like diversity, equity, and inclusion and be explicit about what they mean to us and how we are putting DEI into action on our campus, without any repercussions.

Barriers to Equity

The focus of our project has been the use of OER as a mechanism to address equity challenges. This is not to discount the large number of other barriers to equity our institution and all universities face stemming from decades of systemic racism in our society. We are fortunate at UNC to have an excellent division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and dedicated faculty who are passionate about continual work to meet these challenges. Here though, we equate equity work with OER, so will consider barriers to equity in the framework of barriers to wide adoption of OER on campus.

One major challenge for us is moving our course markings project forward so that it is accurate and complete. It is a Colorado state mandate that students know how much their course materials will cost when they register for classes. The Associate Provost and Assistant Vice President for Undergraduate Studies has directed that the course markings project (information about course materials costs and those courses that use OER or free to students materials), go



through the textbook adoptions process with our Follett bookstore. The bookstore has indicated that it does not have the staff needed to provide all the support needed to make this process accurate. This directly relates to our struggle to determine how many instructors are using OER.

The course marking challenge is a good example of a systemic issue with the promotion of OER as a strategy for improving equity. Adoption of OER is only one of many strategies to improve equity, and equity is only one of many reasons to consider using OER. However, for OER to be a successful strategy for improving equity, there needs to be widespread and consistent buy-in. A major challenge with the course markings, for example, is that our system requires individual faculty to submit course material information. Even for faculty who are passionate about promoting equity, submitting course material information might be low on their list of priorities and as such does not receive their attention. As a result, UNC students are not receiving the most accurate information about course materials costs, although the process is improving due to the work of the UNC AOER committee.

Another area of concern is the rise of automatic textbook billing aka “inclusive access” programs in the state of Colorado. Recently, one Colorado university adopted such a program as a campus-wide initiative. At least one unit on our campus has decided to require textbooks from a common publisher so students buy a subscription to the publisher’s online e-book platform, rather than buying separate textbooks. It is possible that opt-in or required textbook subscriptions in this model might save some students money (although there is nothing preventing publishers from hiking prices once we are committed to their system), but they dramatically hinder the OER movement with all of its other equity-centered benefits.

In spite of these barriers to equity, UNC has continued building our OER work for students and our DOERS3 action plan should help this work become more visible, tied to equity, and formalized in our university’s strategic approaches.

Actions

In our Action Plan we identified six goals, each with multiple action steps identified to help reach those goals. Here we briefly comment on each goal and summarize some of the actions the AOER Committee has recently undertaken or plan to take soon.

1. **Increase student awareness of OER.**

We aim to create an overarching internal and external marketing communication plan and consistent messaging for both potential and existing UNC students and their families about OER courses. Many of the goals listed below will directly contribute to this effort.

2. **Fully and accurately implement OER course markings initiative.**

We have been working toward a course marking system since 2021, but it remains inaccurate and incomplete. We must create systems of accountability for reporting course materials and their costs. Specifically, while we will continue to ask instructors to self-report course materials through the bookstore, we will work with unit leaders, Academic Affairs, the Registrar, and Information Management & Technology to explore



alternative processes to ensure course material information is provided in a timely manner.

3. **Ensure OER use is a recognized strategy for equity-minded teaching and retention efforts.**

We will work to integrate OER professional development into broader professional development initiatives focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion in teaching. This will position OER professional development adjacent to or combined with DEI professional development. Specifically, we will work with the division of DEI, college level DEI committees, and the Center for Teaching and Learning to identify professional development activities and ensure sessions on implementing OER be included.

4. **Ensure OER and equity work is recognized in faculty evaluation criteria across campus.**

As the university reconsiders approaches to faculty evaluation, we will advocate that OER work, in conjunction with DEI and equity-minded pedagogy, are valued in evaluation, tenure and promotion, and sabbatical leave criteria. While working with various campus groups, sharing model language for inclusion in unit-level faculty evaluation and utilizing the [DOERS3 OER in Tenure and Promotion rubric](#) to help inform sample language, can encourage units to move in the right direction on this issue.

5. **Increase the number of Liberal Arts Curriculum (LAC) courses that use OER.**

While we want to increase OER use across all courses, we believe that focusing on our general education curriculum (LAC) is an important and strategic starting point. We are already working to identify and create multiple pathways through the LAC that require no commercial textbook purchases. Such a pathway can be advertised to students as a “Zero Cost LAC” or “Free LAC” pathway.

6. **Improve assessment of OER impacts regarding Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and student success.**

The assessment subcommittee of our AOER committee will craft an assessment plan for OER, including its impacts on underrepresented students and create a dashboard with Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness (OIRE) to make this data widely available. In particular, the plan will consider which courses use OER and answer these questions: Are OER offered in courses with higher numbers of under-represented, Pell eligible, and first-generation students? Are they offered in courses with multicultural content, in LAC curriculum courses, and in Guaranteed Transfer (GT) Pathways courses? Further evidence would include formal recognition of OER in UNC strategic initiatives, and that UNC leadership shares with campus the variety of ways that OER are important.



Reflection on Achievements

Current Progress Status

- The AOER Committee sent a memo regarding Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) tactics to the Assistant Vice President for Student Academic Success and the Associate Vice President for Enrollment Services. The purpose of the memo is intended to formalize UNC's DOERS3 action items as tactics in UNC's Strategic Enrollment Plan.
- The AOER course markings subcommittee developed a video and script about how students can identify their course materials costs, as well as affordable and OER materials (and what those terms mean). We created this tutorial video to help students make informed decisions and make course materials costs more transparent to them before they register for classes. This information is currently being marketed to new students via the new student orientation process and the Registrar's Office.
- The Textbook Affordability Librarian is currently developing a list of open educational resources for each Liberal Arts Curriculum course. These resources will be linked from the LAC site and promoted to LAC instructors in order to help achieve a free to students LAC pathway.

Lessons Learned from this Project

Writing strategic plans is always a challenge. Not only is it difficult to identify what are the best projects to tackle first, or what will have the most impact, it is difficult to organize everything we want to do in a way that can be communicated well to outside constituents. Further complicating the task is the need to conform to the structure provided by the rubric. Many of our ideas for actionable projects span multiple rubric dimensions. However, having the rubric and our gap analysis was helpful in framing discussions about what tasks we should tackle as part of this action plan. Ultimately, we decided to organize our action plan around goals that have the potential to improve our ratings in multiple dimensions of the rubric, rather than structure the action plan rigidly around the rubric.

Future Aspirations

The authors of this case study, along with UNC's AOER Committee members, aspire to implement all of the goals detailed in our DOERS3 Action Plan during the next one to three years.

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