

# Innovating for Access and Success: Open Educational Resource (OER) Policies for TN Community Colleges

## Executive Summary

This report explores the potential of Open Educational Resource (OER) policies to address barriers to access and success resulting from the rising cost of course materials for students at Tennessee community colleges.<sup>1</sup> Increases in consumer prices for college textbooks continue to outpace those of tuition and fees (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016), with students at Tennessee community colleges spending an average of \$1,389 on books and supplies over the 2016-17 academic year (Collier, 2019). Policy intervention could help protect Tennessee student consumers by 1) encouraging faculty to consider cost when selecting course materials and 2) helping raise faculty awareness of more affordable course material options like Open Educational Resources (OER) as described in the overview below.

### Overview of Open Educational Resources

The Hewlett Foundation defines Open Educational Resources (OER) as “high-quality teaching, learning, and research materials that are free for people everywhere to use and repurpose.” In contrast to the restrictive copyright license tied to traditional course materials, authors of OER apply a “Creative Commons” (CC) license to their work that legally enforces free access and sharing. Similar to authors of traditionally copyrighted materials, credit is also given to authors of OER, with the added benefit that others may freely use, build upon, and enhance their work.

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Hewlett Foundation  
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In terms of benefits, users of OER may print all or any portion of the materials, and on average, students save \$116.94 per course when OER is adopted in place of traditional textbooks (Nyamweya, 2018). OER materials are also of increasingly high quality, with faculty reporting OER to be of the same or better quality than that of commercial textbooks (Bliss, et al, 2013; Hendricks, et al, 2017). Educators and students also enjoy benefits from OER’s flexible permissions, which allow users to retain, reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute the material<sup>2</sup>:

1. **Retain.** Students and faculty may make, own, control, and keep copies of the material after the semester and into perpetuity. OER may be downloaded, duplicated, printed, and managed by anyone who holds a copy.
2. **Reuse.** Students and faculty may freely use OER in class, for publicly-posted projects, videos, websites, reports, and other creative products, provided that author(s) are attributed accordingly.
3. **Revise.** Students and faculty may adapt, adjust, modify, and alter OER content, including devising assignments and other activities that collectively improve materials for future use.
4. **Remix.** Students and faculty may freely create new products by combining, adapting, and adding to existing openly-licensed materials. As such, OER empowers faculty to structure and align content with their course learning outcomes.
5. **Redistribute.** Students and faculty may freely share OER materials, in their original or modified forms, with anyone, at any time, in any format.

### Policy Alternatives & Goals

The full report moves from an overview of Open Educational Resources to outline and evaluate three policy alternatives promoting the use of OER across the General Education curriculum:

- **Alternative 1**, a system-funded low/no-cost OER initiative, with examples from Tidewater Community College and the Virginia Community College System.
- **Alternative 2**, a student course fee-funded low/no-cost OER initiative, with examples from Texas institutions Odessa College, San Jacinto College, and El Paso Community College.

<sup>1</sup> COURSE MATERIALS ARE TEXTBOOKS, EBOOKS, WORKBOOKS AND MANUALS, AND/OR ANY OTHER HOMEWORK SYSTEM OR DIGITAL COURSEWARE PRODUCTS A FACULTY MEMBER DESIGNATES AS “REQUIRED” FOR THEIR COURSE.

<sup>2</sup> THE “5R” PERMISSIONS OF OER WERE FIRST OUTLINED BY DAVID WILEY: [HTTP://OPENCONTENT.ORG/DEFINITION/](http://opencontent.org/definition/).

- **Alternative 3**, a system or institution-mandated course material cost cap for all General Education courses, with example from The University of British Columbia.

The alternatives are evaluated and scored based on three policy goals: *access*, *success*, and *feasibility*:

- ✓ **Access** ensures that students have affordable, easy, and continued access to course materials. Access can be measured by 1) student cost savings, 2) ease of access, and 3) ease of implementation for faculty and administrative partners.
- ✓ **Success** entails the extent to which students are empowered to succeed in coursework and make timely progress toward degrees and credentials. Success can be measured by C or better pass rates, credits earned, and the usage of materials within the course.
- ✓ **Feasibility**. Feasibility speaks to the long-term sustainability of an alternative and can be divided into three aspects – economic, cultural, and operational.

The report provides potential system and institution-level impacts, such as the example below for **Alternative 2** that illustrates institutional return and student savings with a \$30 OER course fee for differing percentages of full-time enrollment at Southwest Tennessee Community College. Such a model would provide funding for the institution to sustain and grow initiatives while also reducing student debt:

**Figure 1. Projected Institutional Return & Student Savings: Southwest Tennessee Community College**  
Estimates based on findings in Nyamweya (2018) detailing average traditional material price to be \$134.26 versus OER \$17.32.

	10% FTE* ENROLLED IN ONE OER COURSE	40% FTE ENROLLED IN ONE OER COURSE	50% FTE ENROLLED IN ONE OER COURSE
	<b>\$18,420</b>	<b>\$73,650</b>	<b>\$92,070</b>
	\$64,016 saved by students	\$255,958 saved by students	\$319,974 saved by students

\*Based on Fall 2017 FTE

## Recommendation

The report concludes with a recommendation to adopt **Alternative 2**, a student course fee-funded low/no-cost OER initiative, with the course fee amount beginning at \$30 and steadily decreasing over time with incremental movement toward **Alternative 1** as feasible.

Further recommended is an exploration of the feasibility of **Alternative 3**, establishing a General Education course-level materials cost cap at either the institution or system level, for which the example of The University of British Columbia provides an informative starting point and case study.

View and download the full report <https://perc.utk.edu/reports/>.

## Suggested Citation

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