In the Highways and Hedges: Library Support for OER Adoption Efforts at Higher Education Institutions across Virginia

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Abstract:

A growing number of Virginia higher education libraries are involved in supporting and leading Open Educational Resources (OER) adoption efforts. Statewide, OER initiatives include a unique blend of administrative, grassroots organizations and individuals that work hand in hand to leverage the economic benefits and educational advantages of open educational resources. This article highlights library engagement and leadership, successes and growing pains, on the many levels of OER efforts in Virginia Higher Education.

Introduction: Knowledge does not diminish when it is shared

Open Educational Resources (OER) are "Teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use and re-purposing by others. OER include full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software, and any other tools, materials, or techniques used to support access to knowledge." (William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, n.d.). The 2015 NMC Horizon Report designated the proliferation of

Open Educational Resources as a mid-term trend, "driving EdTech adoption in higher education for three to five years" with real potential for removing cost barriers to education (p.14) by (Johnson, Adams Becker, Estrada, & Freeman, 2015).

The OER trend is local, national, and global. It speaks to many audiences, including libraries. Values of the Open Education movement match with nearly all of the ALA's Core Values of Librarianship: Access, Democracy, Education and Lifelong Learning, Intellectual Freedom, Preservation, The Public Good, Service, and Social Responsibility (American Library Association, 2004). Perhaps this kinship is part of the reason why so many libraries and librarians find an affinity with open education initiatives as we continue to evolve with learner and faculty needs, and embrace the opportunities afforded by emerging technologies.

Librarians have existing expertise in copyright, licensing, finding, and evaluating information, instruction, faculty development, building relationships, and managing projects. This makes us a natural fit to support and lead our communities in areas of open licensing, evaluating, maintaining and providing access to curated open materials, and open publishing as a number of libraries are moving in this direction. It's up to us to lead as we are able.

Open Education in Virginia, a rapidly changing environment

Virginia open education initiatives in higher education have grown from individual and informal initiatives and gatherings to institutional and multi-institution initiatives, and

state-level engagement among individuals, professional association, consortia, and government bodies.

Four notable early initiatives include: Virginia State University's School of Business core curriculum conversion, Tidewater Community College's (TCC) "Z" Degree, Northern Virginia Community College's (NOVA) Kaleidoscope project, and OpenVA: Virginia's Summit on Open and Digital Learning. In 2010 the School of Business at Virginia State University adopted openly licensed textbooks for nine of its courses (Feldstein et al., 2012). TCC's "Z" degree followed as the first in the country to pilot an entire Associate Degree (A.S. Business Administration) in 2013, resulting in reduced costs and statistically significant improvements in student retention and achievement ("Z-degree," n.d.). OpenVA, a loosely organized group of Virginia Higher Education faculty, educational technologists, and administrators organized state-wide meetings in 2013 and 2014 with smaller regional events in 2015 ("OpenVA," n.d.). Also in 2014, NOVA piloted Kaleidoscope, a project supported by EDUCAUSE Next Generation Learning Challenges and Gates Foundation with the goal of assisting faculty in using Open Educational Resources (Northern Virginia Community College, 2014). In 2015, the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) launched the Zx23 Project to build on Tidewater's success and prior Chancellor-funded projects and replicate the Z-Degree across the 23 Virginia Community Colleges ("Zx23 overview," n.d.). Zx23 is packaging OER to establish new degree pathways to existing credentials without traditional textbook cost, and a primary goal of the project is to establish a model for sustaining and supporting the OER infrastructure for degree programs.

The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) has also played a role in facilitating exploration of open education by co-sponsoring OpenVA, creating and sustaining the Library Advisory Committee (LAC) since the 1970s, and in May 2015 creating the Open Virginia Advisory Committee (OVAC) in support of SCHEV's Statewide Strategic Plan for Higher Education. OVAC representation includes public, private, two and four-year institution representation as well as representatives from the LAC and was established to:

1. Make recommendations to Council regarding initiatives and policies that may facilitate OER adoption.

2. Organize events to facilitate inter-institutional networking and the sharing of best practices and expertise on issues related to instructional technology and affordable educational resources.

OVAC's current tasks are to conduct an environmental scan to determine the current status of OER/openness at Virginia's higher education institutions, and to develop an outreach plan.

The Virtual Library of Virginia (VIVA) a consortium of 70+ nonprofit academic libraries within the Commonwealth of Virginia, conducted an OER activities survey of member libraries through its Resource Sharing Committee (RSC) in May 2015. Thirty five of 70+ VIVA member libraries responded. Twenty-seven indicated that their institution is currently exploring or using OER. Twenty-one respondents indicated that the library is somewhat or very involved in these efforts. Twenty-seven thought libraries should play

a role in OER and five said maybe - this group was currently not involved. Fifteen respondents thought VIVA should play a role in OER in Virginia, fifteen others said maybe and two said no. A commissioned task force offered the following recommendations (Virtual Library of Virginia, 2015):

- Educate VIVA members regarding OER and how some institutions are leveraging OER by promoting current VIVA member OER/affordability efforts. Highlight similar work at other consortia.

- Connect with other state level groups that are active in this area (SCHEV's OVAC, Virginia 21, and others) to identify potential areas for collaboration.

- Leverage VIVA content evaluation expertise to evaluating OER. Highlight only high quality OER in a guide to OER + VIVA-provided resources specifically for teaching & learning.

- Lead by example: Apply open licenses to VIVA Web pages and created resources

- Showcase member-created openly licensed learning resources; provide a platform for faculty to share examples of VIVA resources used in open course materials. This would make it possible to find, adopt, and modify materials rather than each institution creating their own resources.

- Explore ways to help VIVA member institutions working on OER/Affordability initiatives collaborate together better

In spring 2015, VIVA established a listserv to support librarians working with OER/open efforts.

Building a cross-institutional librarian community

A number of Virginia libraries are corporately and individually engaged in exploring, leading and supporting open initiatives at and beyond their institutions. These include cross-institutional sharing and networks and OER course-sharing within the VCCS. Institutional, consortia, and public listservs as well as virtual and public in-person events provide valuable cross-institution professional development and networking opportunities. Some of these events include the Virginia Library Association Annual Conference, VCCS' New Horizons Annual Conference, and the new VCCS OER Peer Group. Open networks such as the Virginia Scholarly Communications Forum, and widely advertised institutionally-hosted events with live-streaming and/or event recording are also increasingly offered to internal and public audiences.

The Tidewater Community College (TCC) Z-degree is a high-profile success story from the Virginia two-year system. The college's OER Policy document specifies that librarians will provide support for faculty adopting and developing 'Z' courses, and will teach a 6-week online OER training course called Pathways, which is openly licensed and free available. In 2015, VCCS began the Zx23 Project to scale the Z-degree model beyond Tidewater to all 23 Virginia Community Colleges. A number of community colleges kicked off Zx23 Project teams in September 2015, and each team has a librarian. In response to this, the system library services group began hosting 'Zx23 Project Librarian Meetups' in August 2015. The meetups are a recurring web conference call which supports individual librarians participating in the community

college Zx23 Project teams. These librarians have welcomed the opportunity for

informal cross-college communication to share local project updates, best practices,

and ideas on the most effective way to engage their projects from the library side.

Librarian collaborations extend beyond institutions. Around forty librarians, instructional

designers, and administrators from various institution-types attended the Virginia Library

Association's (VLA) pre-conference workshop: 'Introduction to OER for Librarians' in

October 2015. The workshop was the largest VLA preconference to date. Led by

academic librarians, it introduced open licensing, open educational resources, various

library OER explorations and initiatives, and a myriad of other topics via direct

instruction, storytelling, hands-on activities, and small and large group discussions. The

new VIVA OER listserv was promoted along with supplemental resources selected by

the presenters. Workshop participant feedback was positive. Broadly summarized,

attendees would like to see follow-up on how to start small with OER and get buy-in,

where to find/generate funding, how to build faculty relationships, and strategies to

move open initiatives forward at the institution level. The VLA conference also featured

three other presentations and one poster on OER topics.

Virginia libraries are leading and collaborating to present high profile public events.

Several from November 2015 include: Cable Green from Creative Commons who led

discussion on Statewide Open Leadership for librarians and academic technologists at

the College of William & Mary; Virginia Tech events featured Andy Mink of the Institute

for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education (and OER Commons) who

presented on teacher-collaboration and OER as new approaches in Education, and

Eddie Watson from the University of Georgia who presented UGA's OER initiative which

has saved 21,000 students $2 million in textbook costs in 2013-16. An increasing

number of Virginia libraries are highlighting Open Education and OER during Open

Access Week and Open Education Week, notably Virginia Tech, Virginia

Commonwealth University, George Mason University and others.

Money & Management

Some of the early OER efforts in Virginia developed within the Virginia Community

College System. From 2012 to 2015, grants from the VCCS Chancellor's Innovation

Fund were awarded to at least seven of the two-year schools. In addition, a separate

Chancellor's OER Adoption fund awarded grants of $3,000 toward the development of

15 high-enrollment VCCS OER courses in 2013, and was continued in 2014. The

VCCS' Zx23 Project was made possible by a generous grant from The William & Flora

Hewlett Foundation; the Zx23 pilot will allow the VCCS to kick-start the process of

building out the Z Degree model already in place at Tidewater by providing funding,

support, and training to VCCS colleges to begin building pathways to their own Z

Degrees.

Coordination among four-year institutions is nacent but growing. At the nineteen four-

year institutions responding to the VIVA survey, thirteen indicated knowledge of their

institution exploring or using open educational resources. Of these, ten reported that

their libraries are somewhat to very involved in their institutions' open initiatives. Most of

these libraries reported being in the "exploration" stage, mentioning that they are

building collaborative partnerships, offering workshops, actively sharing openly licensed

curricular resources, organizing faculty and administration meetings, and/or creating

resource guides and awareness-raising materials. One library works with the Open

Textbook Network to host workshops and incentivize reviews of open textbooks.

Several libraries reported collaborations with faculty and teaching/learning centers on

their campus. Two libraries reported receipt of grant funding for OER adoption grants.

Notably, at the College of William and Mary, a collaborative effort between Swem

Library and the Department of Academic Technology received funding from the

Provost's Creative Adaptation Fund to offer 18 grants of $1,000. These grants, plus

training and professional support will support faculty interested in teaching with OER or

those who wish to reduce textbook costs for students (Miller, 2015). The model of an

incentive plus workshop and technical assistance model OER initiative has many

similarities to the [Open Education Initiative funded by the University Libraries and](Provost office of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 2011)

[Provost office of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 2011](#), and the Alternate

Textbook Project at Temple University which was created by the Temple University

Teaching, Learning & Technology Roundtable, also in 2011. Many of these projects use

a combination of openly-licensed and library-subscribed materials available at no

additional cost to students.

Platforms & Partners

Because of the decentralized nature of higher education in Virginia (beyond the VCCS),

most institutions without a University Press utilize a variety of third-party non-profit,

university, commercial or custom-created platforms to find, edit, host, and disseminate openly licensed resources. Faculty from several Virginia institutions share materials with OER Commons, MERLOT II, or on university hosted platforms. Statewide information regarding use of institutional repositories and systems which allow faculty to share openly licensed materials with the public will (hopefully) be identified by the OVAC survey results in 2016.

The Virginia Community College System (VCCS) partnered with [Lumen Learning](), first on the Z Degree at Tidewater Community College and currently on the high-profile Zx23 pilot program. As consultants, Lumen aims to guide instructors to adopt existing, quality-assured OER as a starting place. Lumen offers online 'office hours' to support the Zx23 pilot teams across the state, as well as assistance with open course creation, maintenance, and hosting on their Candela platform, Lumen's WordPress LMS environment. As part of the Zx23 Project, Candela-hosted OER courses appear in the VCCS LMS environment in a special 'OER Courses' menu, enabling VCCS faculty to easily review, copy, and use OER course content in their own course.

What seems to be working so far?
A commitment to streaming and recording events encourages OER awareness and supports involvement statewide, regardless of institution size or staffing. Furthermore, while the energy and interest of individuals has largely fueled OER efforts in Virginia, "top down" support is also needed from library administrators, deans, provosts, and presidents in order to provide the time, compensation, opportunities, and political

support necessary for developing OER policies and programs. We have also found at every level that partnerships among various groups have been key. Open educational resources have many stakeholders, which means that there are many avenues for library outreach and collaboration.

To encourage faculty participation, several Virginia libraries have received grants or institutional funds in order to offer incentive programs. Libraries can also employ strategies such as partnering with faculty who are already advocates for OER, and offering support and training, such as the Pathways course, workshops for professional development credit, or customized one-on-one consultations. We also recommend reaching out to faculty who actually have the power to select their own course materials, or who teach high enrollment courses that can be supported by existing, high quality open textbooks.

To support OER, we also need to train and generate buy-in from librarians. The events and networks discussed in this paper are key factors in building interest and knowledge concerning OER. Librarians new to OER can participate in the same training and professional opportunities offered to faculty, which is also an excellent way to develop relationships with instructors in various departments, and to learn about faculty interests and concerns.

Emerging challenges

Exploring new ground does not come without its share of growing pains. The first

challenge is to develop a shared goal as well as a shared understanding of the term

"open." If our goal is only to lower course material costs for students, instructors can

select any free resource to use, including library subscriptions. However, if we define

open as free to retain, reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute (Wiley, 2014), then open

refers only to those materials in the public domain or those licensed for such use. As in

nearly every institutional or statewide endeavor, communication can be difficult, at

times. While admirable efforts are being made, there is always room for improvement,

particularly in the early stages of developing a network of support for OER.

In order to support the philosophy of open education, academic libraries and the

institutions in which they reside must fully embrace the concept of sharing. One

roadblock to sharing is making the philosophical shift to open licensing. While many

libraries "practice what they preach" by applying Creative Commons licenses, others

have not yet acquired this habit. Technology, while tremendously beneficial to learning,

can also present a problem in terms of lack of compatibility among platforms, or the

need to host course materials within password-protected learning management systems

which limit sharing. In addition, institutions must consider accessibility issues when

creating and sharing new open educational resources, as well as access to a sufficient

Internet speed. Finally, we lack an efficient system for hosting and/or locating Open

Educational Resources. On one hand, this is where librarians can apply their searching

expertise. On the other hand, the multiple OER repositories and variety of licenses may

intimidate potential adopters.

Faculty encounter other hindrances to OER adoption, including lack of available high-quality material in their discipline and a lack of time or incentives for creating new material. Even when adopting existing resources, courses must be substantially redesigned when shifting away from a textbook, or when replacing a traditional textbook with an open one. Faculty may also need additional technology training in order to successfully incorporate, remix, or revise open educational resources.

Conclusion: The Road Ahead

Although adopting a new approach to course "texts" comes with a learning curve, the authors have encountered a number of pleasant surprises along the way. For one thing, there are many groups and individuals interested in OER for a number of different reasons, including affordability, student success, faculty innovation, pedagogy, and more. This has created opportunities for better partnerships not only among libraries, but also within institutions, and with state-level organizations, policy advisors and legislators. OER and the open education movement have also allowed librarians to participate in a high-interest, high-visibility area, and to demonstrate our ability to support student learning in what might appear to be a non-traditional area. In Virginia, libraries have leveraged existing networks and developed new channels in order to share our knowledge and experiences in this emerging realm, and have found that stakeholders statewide have welcomed our support and expertise. While we don't know yet where this path will take us, we are enjoying the ride!

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