

Joint Task Force On Student Success for Underrepresented Students in Higher Education

Amy Hofer, Statewide Open Education Program Director, Open Oregon Educational Resources, May 19, 2022

Chair Alonso León and members of the task force, my name is Amy Hofer, Statewide Open Education Program Director, Open Oregon Educational Resources.

I am here today to make sure that textbook affordability is part of the important discussion that this task force is leading on student success for underrepresented students.

Oregon has made significant financial and policy investments in textbook affordability since 2015. On the policy side, we require that each community college and university label no-cost and low-cost courses with a designation in the course schedule. Each institution must create and implement a textbook affordability plan. Starting this fall, we have on-time adoption reporting targets so that the information in the course schedule will be as complete as possible and students can plan their budgets in advance.

The no-cost/low-cost schedule designation is an important communication tool for students. In the 2019-21 biennium, designated courses at 18 institutions are estimated to have saved over 600,000 students, by headcount, in 32,000 course sections, almost \$50 million. At the reporting institutions, almost 20% of courses offered were designated no-cost or low-cost.

The legislature, HECC, and CCWD have also made direct financial investments in Oregon's statewide OER program since 2015. As a result of \$1.1 million in open education grants to faculty, between 2015-2021, students saved a cumulative estimated \$14 million. This represents about \$12 in student savings per program dollar spent.

While course material costs are measurably dropping as a result of statewide investments, and the hard work of faculty who redesign their courses with free, open, and low-cost materials, there is more that we can do, and many reasons to maintain our momentum so that students have access to the materials they need in order to succeed academically.

Data from then HECC shows that in Oregon, the cost of textbooks is relatively small compared to housing and tuition costs. Yet research shows that what might be considered a minor expense can have an outsize impact on completion. Saving a seemingly small amount of money on textbooks can prevent the kinds of emergencies that arise when you don't have a financial cushion and therefore have an impact on retention.

Peer-reviewed research demonstrates that historically underserved students are disproportionately harmed by textbook costs. Pell Grant recipients, part-time students, and first-generation students report that high textbooks costs are a barrier to their academic goals, and the problem compounds for students with intersecting underserved identities, such as first-generation students who also identify as a nonwhite race or ethnicity.

Oregon has used legislation to help move the needle on textbook affordability since 2015. I urge you to include textbook affordability in any policy concept that comes out of this task force in order to address this pressing issue.

Thank you, any questions?