

Massachusetts Public Higher Education

Course Marking Survey

OER Course Flagging Committee

Overview

In the *OER Final Report & Recommendations* (2019), produced by the OER Working Group and endorsed by the Board of Higher Education, one of the recommendations was to implement course marking across public higher education.

Course marking is “the process of assigning specific, searchable attributes to courses” (Ainsworth, Allen, Dai, Elder, Finkbeiner, Freeman, Hare, Helge, Helregel, Hoover, Kirschner, Perrin, Raye, Reed, Schoppert, & Thompson, 2020)

Students have informed us that they are far more likely to take OER courses when they know they are being offered through course marking. That also means that more faculty members were encouraged to develop their courses using OER to meet the desire of students to lower the costs of textbooks. Of course, there are also faculty members who feel they will be penalized if they do not chose to select OER and that it will be a violation of their academic freedom. All of these were among the issues for which we needed to obtain actual versus anecdotal information.

The survey was developed and administered for the purpose of learning the status of course marking among public institutions of higher education in Massachusetts. Among those institutions that had implemented course marking, we sought to identify shared characteristics, obstacles to implementation, and to create a set of recommendations that will be instructive for other public institutions seeking to establish similar systems of designation on their campuses.

Executive Summary

100% of the Commonwealth’s public higher education institutions participated in the survey. An analysis of the survey results is provided below. The results highlight that:

- 1. The definition of OER among MA public colleges and universities is still evolving.** Of the institutions currently designating courses as OER, many do not define open education materials as *solely* textbooks, and many do not identify OER courses as “free” of cost to students. Instead, definitions of OER can also include ancillary materials and can cost up to \$50 in materials. As a result, campuses vary in the way that OER courses are “flagged” for students. **There is no shared OER marker across MA institutions of public higher education.**
- 2. Community Colleges lead the way in MA.** The colleges that have successfully created course flagging schemes in Massachusetts are our community colleges.

Their efforts highlight the power of bringing together campus partners to identify an OER definition that is homegrown, that works with the campus student information system, and that acknowledges the importance of on-going campus collaboration to keep the designation system working.

3. Unions can be partners in successful OER course marking systems.

Anecdotal concerns about collective bargaining as an obstacle to successful adoption of OER marking systems did not arise as a significant barrier in the survey outcomes. Instead, results highlight the importance of recognizing the way that OER achieves student-centered outcomes on our campuses.

4. Sustaining OER flagging initiatives is complex work – success requires thinking beyond adoption. Every respondent that has a designation system, those that have tried and failed, and those that are trying to implement, universally describe the complexity of managing the details related to this type of program.

Based on these results we recommend that:

1. We should develop an implementation blueprint that public institutions of higher education will be able to use to implement course flagging using the knowledge gained from the institutions that have already implemented it.
2. The OER Work Group and the Board of Higher Education adopted the UNESCO definition of open educational resources. That is, our focus is on increasing the adoption, adaptation, and creation of free OER¹ resources. However, in terms of tracking activities, there are at least four streams of open education activities that all help to reduce costs of textbooks and ancillaries for students. Without creating an overly burdensome reporting system, it may be necessary to track these as:
 - Free and OER
 - Free and not OER
 - LowCost and OER
 - LowCost and not OER
3. Define low cost as equal to or less than \$40 statewide. Reducing the average cost of textbooks from \$117² to \$40 or less provides significant savings to students. In addition, the cost is often for ancillaries that are an important teaching and learning tool. While our focus remains on OER as free, we recognize that low cost (i.e., < \$40) is a useful means to the same end³. And, it provides an incentive to faculty to adopt these existing low cost alternatives that

¹ OER meaning that the resources are subject to the 5Rs definition of retain, reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute. This definition excludes tools and supplies, auxiliary fees, and small copying/printing costs.

² SPARC (2018).

³ This does not include so-called inclusive access arrangements provided by publishers, which are typically \$100 or greater.

advance the cause of lowering student textbook and ancillary expense, which faculty members may not have the time to create.

4. Establish NoCost and LowCost as common statewide designations.
5. Encourage institutions that have not currently implemented course flagging to create a committee of key stakeholders including local faculty union leadership in order to collaboratively implement this student-centered service.

Survey Methodology

The Qualtrics survey was designed by the OER Course Flagging Committee⁴ to be delivered to and answered by the members of the OER Advisory Council at the 29 higher education public institutions. The 17 question survey was intended to be completed in 5-10 minutes. The actual results show that time to complete ranged from one to 18 minutes or 6.3 minutes on average.

During June and July 2020, survey results were received and compiled from 100% of institutions. Data tables and summary data were generated for review, analysis, and discussion by the OER Course Flagging Committee in order to develop recommendations for action for the OER Advisory Council.

Summary of Survey Results

There are ten institutions that have implemented course marking including: Bunker Hill Community College, Holyoke Community College, Massasoit Community College, Mass. Bay Community College, Mt. Wachusett Community College, North Shore Community College, Northern Essex Community College, Roxbury Community College, Springfield Technical Community College, and University of Massachusetts Lowell.

Fifty percent of institutions defined OER as open textbooks **and** ancillaries, 36% defined them as open textbooks or ancillaries, and 14% defined them as open textbooks only.

Although the *OER Final Report & Recommendations* recommended that the DHE focus on free resources, 39% of the institutions defined OER as free/no cost, 36% defined OER as low cost, and 25% did not define OER at all.

Since over a third of the institutions use low cost as their definition of OER, that led to understanding what did they mean by low cost. Fifty-four percent did not define low cost, 12% defined low cost as less than \$50, and 34% of institutions defined low cost as less than \$40.

Given anecdotal information, we were pleased to learn that 62% of the institutions stated that collective bargaining had not been an impediment to their ability to implement course marking. That result may be added to 7% who said they had

⁴ The members of the OER Course Flagging Committee include Tim Dolan, Greenfield Community College; Millie Gonzalez, Framingham State University; Danielle Leek, Moderator, Bunker Hill Community College; Donna Maturi, Middlesex Community College; Donna Mellen, Scribe, UMass Lowell; Bernadette Sibuma, Mass. Bay Community College; and McKenzie Ward, Student, Framingham State University.

collective bargaining issues, but were able to resolve them locally. Thus, 69% (n = 20) of the institutions did not have or were able to overcome collective bargaining issues as a barrier to successful implementation. As to the 31% (n = 9) who did have collective bargaining issues with which they were or will have to address, the following were some of the commentaries:

- “We must be cognizant of faculty sensitivity to administrative interference in course materials selection.”
- “There are concerns over stipends for delivering material.”
- Although the “union president has not taken this issue to their membership, but has consistently blocked any administration efforts.”
- “Administration/management has not initiated a conversation with the union.”

There was also a suggestion offered as to how to address these potential barriers to success:

- The union has formed a working group tasked with considering OER on campus (we feel this is in positive support of such initiatives).”

Another important aspect was to learn who were the key stakeholders involved in decision-making and execution of OER initiatives. The most prevalent were campus [senior] administration, faculty, students, information technology, library, and academic deans who represented 89% of the identified stakeholders. As previously noted, 66% (n = 19) of the institutions did not have any system of course marking and only 34% (n = 10) did.

Since 66% of the institutions did not have any course marking system in place, it was important to understand why that was the case. The following were the most prevalent responses:

- OER is not there yet (30%)
- Process has not yet been proposed (23%)
- No clear definition of OER (10%)
- In process, but not yet solidified (10%)

For those institutions who designate OER courses, there was no commonality among them as to the designation. They included No Cost/Low Cost; NOLO; OER; OERN (Zero materials cost) and OERL (Materials cost < \$40); and no cost or low cost class materials.

As to who was responsible for curating the OER designation process, the responses were extremely varied. The most prevalent (65%) responses were:

- Other (29%)⁵
- Academic Dean (18%)
- Registrar's Office (18%)

Overwhelming, faculty governance was not involved (70%) in establishing and/or maintaining the course flagging process.

At the institutions who had implemented course marking, we needed to discern what resources have been committed to successfully implement this initiative and the results were mixed: 50% had added the task to the scope of an existing employee, 40% had not hired any new resources suggesting that they had also added this role to an existing employee, and 10% had hired a full-time employee for this role.

Given the answer to the previous response, the overwhelming feedback we received (89%) regarding how challenging it is to maintain and update the OER designations each semester/term is not surprising. The following are selected comments received:

- The OER designation is at the instructor level. However, faculty do not always teach the same CRN/section each term. Thus, the information must constantly be verified.
- Faculty are [constantly] leaving campus and changing resources.
- It requires constant monitoring to schedule and follow changing faculty and course materials.
- Faculty often get pulled from a course at the last minute and a new faculty member substituted who may or may not use OER.
- It is manual and time consuming (several stated this).
- We are having problems getting our OER committee moving, especially during COVID
- Unless the union issues can be solved at the statewide level via statute, we are not hopeful we will be able to move this initiative forward

References:

Ainsworth, B., Allen, N., Dai, J., Elder, A., Finkbeiner, N., Freeman, A., Hare, S., Helge, K., Helregel, N., Hoover, J., Kirschner, J., Perrin, J., Raye, J., Reed, M., Schoppert, J., & Thompson, L. (2020) is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#), except where otherwise noted.

OER Working Group (2019). *The OER final report & recommendations*. Boston: Mass. Massachusetts Department of Higher Education.

⁵ Other included instructional designer, teaching & learning center, professional staff, human resources and office of online learning.