OER & Estimating Student Savings

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What Are OER and Who Are We?

Open Educational Resources (OER) are "teaching, learning and research materials in any medium, digital or otherwise, that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions." UNESCO

The Kansas Board of Regents OER Steering Committee consists of instructors, librarians, administrators, and other staff from member institutions charged to support and encourage the use of OER across Regent institutions, as textbook costs affect affordability, access, and success for students across the state of Kansas. Part of this goal is providing guidance including how to estimate savings.

Why Estimate Savings?

A key benefit of OER is reducing the cost of higher education for students. What better way to measure growth in that area than an estimate of the savings to students? Institutions need a reliable and concise measure to compare progress, programs, and different institutions as well as to communicate the value of OER to other stakeholders. Those working on the front lines of OER prefer a measure that isn't too time consuming so they can get back to the work of spreading awareness and helping those adopting, adapting, and creating OER at Kansas colleges and universities. Regents institutions benefit from a common method to estimate savings, when appropriate and possible.

Challenges to Estimate Savings

While OER advocates broadly agree that tracking savings resulting from the use of OER is valuable and necessary, there are challenges to doing so. First, estimates of savings are just that: *estimates*. It's difficult, if not impossible, to accurately capture savings due to a number of factors, such as competing methodologies, access to cost and enrollment data, wide variability in cost and enrollment, known student reactions to costly materials, and the time and staffing required to collect and capture these variables. No single method for estimating savings is universally appropriate to every institution, academic subject, or situation. Estimating dollars saved by students doesn't account for non-monetary costs, such as time invested by instructors and other staff, or non-monetary returns, such as benefits to learning, retention, and equity.

Recognizing these limitations, the key is to be transparent about methodology, and that it is an estimate, not necessarily an accurate reflection of savings.

Why $100?

There are a number of standards for estimating savings, each with their own reasonable arguments and critiques. These estimates range from OpenStax' $79.37 per student impacted to SPARC's $116.94 per student. Some have advocated for estimating savings based on actual costs, or an average of high and low cost of a given textbook. However, most agree that $100 is a reasonable figure that is clear and relatively simple to implement. The Open Education Network recommends $100, and numerous institutions have embraced it, including several Kansas Regents institutions.

Given the arguments for estimating savings and recognizing the limitations of estimates, the KBOR OER Steering Committee recommends the following formula for estimating savings resulting from OER use in the System:

[# of students impacted] x $100 = [savings estimate]

The variable needed here is the number of students impacted. While there's room for institutions to define "impacted" locally, we mean those who are assigned OER as primary required course materials.

The formula above is simple to calculate and can scale from a single course section, to a degree program or department, to an entire institution, and the whole KBOR System. Because this requires minimal data collection (enrollment numbers), there's no reason other estimates can't also be calculated for local use, such as estimates based on the OpenStax or SPARC figures cited above. Institutions with the staffing and will to undertake a more intensive analysis may do so, but that's not within the current capacity of all institutions, so $100 per student is reasonable, aligned with recognized norms, simple to justify, and relatively easy to implement with minimal time and staffing investment.