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Southern Regional Education Board

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Wiring the Future

Building an Infrastructure for Open Education

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Overview

The open education movement has propelled open educational resources to the forefront of conversations on improving access and success in higher education. Technological advancements like the internet have expanded educational opportunities by allowing students to access information instantly, communicate globally and share learning materials at little to no cost. However, the traditional market for educational materials and legacy textbook publishing models impose significant barriers, including high costs and content restrictions. In response, open education aims to employ technology to make learning more accessible, affordable and effective.

Seventy-five percent of the SREB Educational Technology Cooperative members identified OER as a 2023 priority issue.

The use of open educational resources is rooted in the desire to minimize barriers to education and maximize opportunities for access and participation in knowledge creation, especially for communities with limited access to traditional educational resources. Given the

What are Open Educational Resources?

Creative Commons defines OER as teaching, learning and research materials that are either (a) in the public domain or (b) licensed in a manner that provides everyone with free and perpetual permission to engage in the 5R activities — retaining, remixing, revising, reusing and redistributing the resources.



rapidly changing postsecondary landscape and how it can impact students financially, higher education institutions must develop strategies to continue promoting student access and success.

In the past, the Southern Regional Education Board has promoted OER work throughout the region through the generous support of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. SREB continues to drive this work by:

- Promoting the creation of high-quality educational content through the distribution of OER capacity building grants to institutions of higher education.
- Increasing access to education technology through Midwestern Higher Education Compact Technology Contracts savings.
- Facilitating OER research, collaboration and knowledge sharing through participation in the National Consortium of Open Educational Resources, policy research and hosting convenings.

This brief is the second issue of a three-part series, *Wiring the Future*. The goal of the series is to capture the region's policies and progress surrounding broadband, open educational resources and digital learning horizons as discussed by the SREB Educational Technology Cooperative between January 2023 and March

2024. The SREB ETC functions as an advisory body, meeting quarterly to communicate and inform SREB about state-wide education technology practices. As SREB delves into the five core priorities established in 2023 — Artificial Intelligence in Education, Career Pathways, Longitudinal Literacy, Postsecondary Student Success and Teacher Workforce — the ETC will continue convening to share information and inform SREB on emerging education issues that fall within the scope of the core priorities. Members of the ETC can be found in Appendix A.

SREB has identified the need to increase the awareness and adoption of open educational resources to drive student success. Policy research and promising practices presented in this paper are a synthesis of the most frequently discussed themes that emerged from the ETC's conversations throughout their quarterly convenings. More information on the methods of this analysis can be found in Appendix B.

A Case for Open Education

College textbooks have become increasingly unaffordable for students. In 2024, the <u>College Board</u> estimated that full-time undergraduate students budgeted over \$1,200, on average, for course materials during the 2024-2025 school year. This included money for "hardcopy textbooks, online textbooks, textbook rentals, and other supplies such as a personal computer."

Expensive textbook prices force students to choose between experiencing financial strain or foregoing textbook purchases altogether — both options affecting students' abilities to succeed in their courses. In fact, an estimated 65% of students skipped purchasing textbooks due to costs when surveyed by the U.S. Public Interest Research Group in 2021. Their report, titled *Fixing the Broken Textbook Market*, also found that one in five students did not buy access codes, meaning that they did not have opportunities to complete homework, quizzes and other graded materials.

For most students, participation in the traditional textbook market means making tough decisions between optimal course preparation and other necessities. By giving free options to course texts and materials, open educational resources solve at least this part of the problem, allowing students to focus on succeeding in their courses. A <u>study</u> on the impact of OER on various student success metrics at the University of Georgia found that students with access to open resources were more likely to perform better. When looking across demographic groups, OER adoption resulted in significantly larger reductions in drop, fail or withdrawal rates for Pell recipients, part-time students and student groups attaining degrees at lower rates.

Participation in the traditional textbook market means making tough decisions between optimal course preparation and other necessities.



Investing in Faculty Drives OER Work

Although OER are offered to students and teachers at no cost, there are up-front costs for the production, distribution or adoption of the educational resources. There is a common misconception that OER are offered free of charge, but financial investments and human capital are essential to create and adapt OER. Across the SREB region, initiatives to implement OER have focused on investing in human capital by offering faculty training to adopt and adapt open materials. Some organizations like the <u>Online Consortium</u> <u>of Oklahoma</u> and Affordable Learning Georgia have seen success through financial investments that provide grant funds for faculty that use OER, modify and redesign OER for their classrooms or for projects to create new OER courses and materials. Funding opportunities for faculty respond to the concern that adopting OER is time intensive and that there is limited return on investment. Unlike the traditional publishing model, publishers and authors of open textbooks are paid for their labor upfront by the funding organization or grant, instead of relying on sales to pay back their investments.

In West Virginia, <u>OpenLearningWV's OER Grant Program</u> disperses \$1,000 grants to faculty who seek to create or adopt open educational resources for college courses. West Virginia ETC member Corley Dennison shared that by their seventh round of funding in 2024, the organization had funded about 550 to 560 faculty members. OpenLearningWV expanded its grant offerings in 2024 with a discipline-specific faculty grant program, <u>Bridge OER</u>. The program offers \$2,500 in funding to incentivize the creation of OER materials for high-need areas of study, including in engineering, communications and media, computer science and criminal justice. Apart from grants, the members shared that the organization also subsidizes conference registrations for faculty to attend OER workshops.

Georgia, among other states, also has grant opportunities available for faculty creating OER materials through <u>Affordable Learning Georgia</u>. ALG provides Transformation, Continuous Improvement and Research Grants which help faculty create, maintain, update and conduct research on open educational resources. Over the past 26 funding rounds, <u>past grantees</u> have developed open textbooks, video lectures, assignments and other ancillary materials. Grant awards ranged from \$1,500 to \$30,000.

"There's evidence that the work being done at institutions to advance OER through local initiatives is working. If faculty members are aware of OER initiatives, they are far more likely to be adopters of OER... Sometimes through programs offering incentives or grants, but in other cases, it's just [about] raising awareness."

- Nicole Allen, SPARC

Throughout conversations on OER across the region, ETC members emphasized the benefits of faculty credentialing in addition to grant incentives. Members across multiple states mentioned that peer-to-peer recognition, research incentives and micro-credentialing opportunities increased faculty's pride and motivation to learn about OER. Affordable Learning Georgia publishes a <u>directory</u> of local faculty, library and design champions for OER, individuals who have had success with the development and implementation of OER at their respective institutions. In Oklahoma, the <u>Online Consortium of Oklahoma</u> has been awarding credentials to OER grant awardees, contributors and champions since fall 2020 to

recognize faculty for their work in driving OER. In addition to the digital badge, OCO has previously offered \$50 grants for the first 90 faculty and staff who completed their OER 101 training course.

Jon Sizemore, Georgia ETC member, noted that faculty were proud to earn titles like 'OER Champion,' often seeing them show up on signature lines and tenure applications. As Georgia ETC member Charmayne Patterson put it, publicizing the stories and institutional impact of OER Champions has allowed the open movement to "gain some momentum for a greater understanding [of OER], but also greater investment and interest."

Transparency of OER and Course Marking Legislation

In the face of the expanding open movements, the traditional textbook industry has adopted Inclusive Access, Day One Access and Equitable Access messaging. While it is easy to associate Inclusive Access messaging with OER's mission of accessible resources, Inclusive Access is a for-profit procurement model where students "pay to lease access to commercially created digital materials," according to Central Washington University as cited by the <u>RCC Library</u>.

Under IA models, all students get access to course materials on the first day of class, and the charges are automatically included in their tuition bill. As a result, automatic textbook billing means that students end up paying for book fees by default and have to go out of their way to opt-out of these fees if they choose to purchase their books from different vendors or in different formats. Thus, while Inclusive Access may save money for students who regularly buy textbooks at full price, it may end up <u>costing</u> <u>more</u> for students who typically borrow, rent or purchase used books.

If a student needs to retake a course or wants to revisit course materials, they need to pay for the materials again.

While vendors advertise discounted rates of <u>up to 70%</u> using IA services, students often experience restrictions on how they use digital textbooks under this model. Students often access materials on specific websites and cannot be downloaded to their computer. Oftentimes, the textbook is only available for the semester in which the student takes the course. If a student needs to retake a course or wants to revisit course materials, they need to pay for the materials again. Through OER, students have perpetual and free access to materials that they can access on day one, before the term and after the term.

"These models add the cost of textbooks into students' tuition and fees. Rather than letting students shop around to get their materials, they decide that the only place you're going to get these materials is through the institution's bookstore or online platform and the cost gets automatically billed. These programs are often unjustified in reducing costs for students — the savings don't always stack up."

- Nicole Allen, SPARC

Some states have increased the visibility of courses using OER through course marking initiatives. According to *Marking Open and Affordable Courses: Best Practices and Case Studies*, a <u>book</u> co-authored by ETC member Rebel Cummings-Sauls, course marking is the process of assigning specific, searchable attributes to courses through letters, numbers, graphic symbols or colors. Open and affordable course marking stems from the idea of transparent communication and student empowerment. Through course marking, students can quickly identify important information to aid in their decision-making and efficiently plan their academic careers, especially if textbook costs are barriers to enrollment. As mentioned in <u>Chapter 15</u> of the book, the transparency of course marking practices promotes student agency as they balance other important commitments and restrictions in their lives.

ETC members also shared anecdotal evidence of OER course marking being a significant driving factor for enrollments among sections of the same course. When one section of a course used OER materials while another did not, the section with the OER designation tended to fill seats more quickly than the section without it.

State legislation has played an essential role in laying the foundation for course marking. The following states have enacted course marking legislation:

State	Legislation	Description
Florida	HB 5001 (2022)	Requires each Florida college system institution and state university to mark in their course registration system any courses that use open educational resources or have zero textbook costs at least 45 days before the term begins.
Louisiana	SB117 (2019)	Requires Louisiana public colleges and universities to "use a conspicuous symbol, logo, or other distinguishing feature" to identity courses in its catalog that exclusively use open educational resources or affordable educational resources.
Maryland	HB 318 (2020) - Textbook Transparency Act of 2020	Requires each institution in the University System of Maryland to clearly indicate courses in the online course catalog that use free digital materials or low-cost print materials.
Texas	SB 810 (2017)	Requires institutions of higher education to compile a course schedule indicating where the required textbook was an open educational resource.
Virginia	HB 2380 (2019)	Requires registrars at public institutions of higher education to conspicuously identify courses for which the instructor exclusively uses no-cost or low-cost course materials.
West Virginia	HB 4355 (2022)	Requires state institutions to disclose (1) whether a course material is an open educational resources, (2) whether the student will be billed automatically for course material and the amount, (3) how student data will be used by a publisher that automatically charged materials and (4) information about the student's choice to opt-out of automatic billing and/or use of their data.

Course Marking Legislation in SREB States

Source: SPARC OER State Policy Tracker

OER Repositories Engage Institutions, Staff and Students

Another successful method of increasing the visibility of OER has been the creation of OER repositories. During the 2019 Texas legislative session, the state allocated funding to support the creation of a statewide OER repository. In 2020, the Division of Digital Learning at the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, in partnership with the Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education, launched <u>OERTX</u> — a digital resource repository and community engagement hub that boasts over half a million users and over 12,000 resources today. The <u>2024 OER</u> <u>Landscape biennial report</u> found that 60% of institutions were working to improve access to OER through centralized repositories, and 35% created their own institutional repositories in addition to using OERTX.

Matching open educational resources to popular courses draws users to OER repositories, making it easy for educators and students to find the high-quality materials they need. In 2022, the DL division commissioned a <u>research analysis</u> to identify highly transferable, high enrollment courses that led to high-demand, Awareness and adoption of open educational resources across the SREB region thrive when institutions, faculty, staff and students are actively engaged and supported.



high-wage careers. Findings revealed that 25 high-impact courses had at least one existing high quality externally peer-reviewed OER course or textbook in the state repository, which led to the creation of a centralized hub for optimized search. This work has expanded to address workforce needs. In 2023, THECB partnered with <u>OpenStax</u> on the <u>OER Nursing Essentials project</u>, creating eight new peer-reviewed, openly licensed nursing textbooks on OERTX to help address barriers in nursing education that have led to a significant shortage of professional in the nursing industry. The project is expected to save Texas nursing students millions of dollars annually in textbook costs.

Other states have similar initiatives. In Florida, after HB 5001 in 2022, the state launched the <u>Student Open</u> <u>Access Resources Repository</u>, created in partnership with Florida Virtual Campus and OPEN FL. Florida ETC member Rebel Cummings-Sauls reported that the repository contained "over 100 resources and identifie[d] resources for the top 10 dual enrollment courses," with goals to identify resources for the top 25 dual enrollment courses by the end of 2024.

Awareness and adoption of open educational resources across the SREB region thrive when institutions, faculty, staff and students are actively engaged and supported. Whether through mini-grants, professional development opportunities or credentials, empowering faculty to lead OER adoption in their courses opens the doors for thousands of students to pursue a more affordable education. Additionally, investing in OER technology, such as repositories and course marking, through legislation, funding and infrastructure planning ensures that states and institutions serve as reliable sources for low-cost learning materials.

SREB continues to work with regional and state OER leaders to identify or establish State Action Teams that will lead the development of OER infrastructure in their states. These teams will play a crucial role in supporting open education initiatives by fostering collaboration among shareholders, supporting the implementation of policy strategies and working to develop policy recommendations in collaboration with the ETC.

Beyond regional conversations, SREB contributes to the national conversations with the broader OER community as well. Through strategic coordination and collaborative action, SREB expanded OER awareness at the national level. More than a year of community conversations around a national initiative gave birth to the <u>Open Education Association Development Project</u> at the start of 2025. This joint effort aims to elevate recognition of open education throughout the United States, bridge gaps between existing efforts and foster connections that empower a greater collective impact for learners.

As these efforts grow, SREB remains committed to advancing OER initiatives that promote awareness, reduce costs and create lasting educational opportunities for students across the region and beyond.

Promising Practices

Increasing OER implementation across southern communities requires collaboration between states, institutional leadership and faculty and staff. The SREB ETC has identified the following promising practices that have propelled OER initiatives in their states.

OER at All Levels: Collaboration between governments, organizations and institutions is necessary to promote the large-scale adoption of OER. Promising practices throughout the region include governments passing OER legislation, organizations advancing research on the impacts of OER and the creation of repositories at the state and institutional level. All of these collaborative efforts have pushed OER to the forefront of conversations on accessibility and affordability, communicating the value of OER to those who may not have heard about it.

Faculty Investment: Developing and implementing OER materials requires significant time and effort. Recognizing and incentivizing faculty contributions — through small grant initiatives, credentialing opportunities and professional development opportunities — can catalyze the advancement of OER adoption and development. Faculty are more likely to produce low or no-cost textbooks and ancillary materials when they are recognized or compensated for their work.

Course Marking and Course Packets: Implementing OER course marking helps students identify courses that offer low- or no-cost textbooks. Additionally, establishing and promoting OER course packets for high-enrollment, highly transferable courses allow students and faculty to find the high-quality resources they need. These efforts increase the visibility of OER to larger audiences and allow students to make informed choices during their academic careers.

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Appendix A

Members of the SREB Educational Technology Cooperative

Alabama

Ron Leonard Alabama Commission on Higher Education

Arkansas

Evan Patrick Southeast Arkansas Education Service Cooperative

Relinda Ruth University of Arkansas-Cossatot Community College

Delaware

Alyssa Moore Delaware Department of Education

Florida

Rebel Cummings-Sauls Florida Virtual Campus

John Opper Florida Virtual Campus

Faye Jones Florida State University

Georgia

Robert Keown Technical College System of Georgia

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Jon Sizemore University System of Georgia

Kentucky

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Carol Mosley Louisiana Department of Education

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Virginia

Dorothy Jones Norfolk State University

Kirstin Pantazis State Council of Higher Education for Virginia

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Corley Dennison West Virginia Higher Education Policy

Appendix A, continued

Industry Partners

Ahrash Bissell The NROC Project

Wiley Brazier We Greaux People

Glen Spencer Propel Center

Eric Wood Apple

Invited Presenters

Nicole Allen SPARC

Jinann Bitar EdTrust

Maureen Neighbors Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs

Melinda Newfarmer Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education

Appendix B

Methods

The Southern Regional Education Board's recommendations are grounded in the qualitative data collection from quarterly meetings of the SREB Education Technology Cooperative from January 2023 and March 2024. These meetings focused on three key issues: open educational resources, broadband and digital learning horizons. The goal of the data collection was to capture the recurring themes, best practices and ideas shared by ETC members across the SREB states, which inform the promising practices around open educational resources in this paper.

SREB gathered data from nine transcripts and six sets of survey responses that documented discussions and presentations during the quarterly ETC meetings. The audio recordings of these meetings were transcribed by an SREB research analyst, who reviewed and corrected the transcriptions to ensure accuracy. Using qualitative content analysis, textual data was coded and categorized through an inductive approach with the help of Dedoose software. Inductive coding is a method whereby codes and themes are developed from the interpretation of raw data rather than starting with a predetermined set of codes.

To ensure the validity of the findings, the ETC members reviewed the themes and interpretations during the development of the paper; they were also given the opportunity to review drafts of the paper throughout the writing process.

Recurring ideas and dialogue were organized to highlight the most prominent themes and subcodes for each issue area. These themes were informed by recurring points raised by ETC members, often reflecting their experiences with state initiatives, challenges and visions for future improvements. Specific examples shared by members regarding state or institutional initiatives were also identified, alongside references to external sources related to these efforts.

To ensure the validity of the findings, the ETC members reviewed the themes and interpretations during the development of the paper; they were also given the opportunity to review drafts of the paper throughout the writing process. Their feedback helped ensure that the analysis accurately reflected the perspectives and priorities discussed in the meetings.

It is important to note that the promising practices presented in the paper are not the result of formal decision-making by the SREB ETC, but rather a synthesis of the most frequently discussed and emphasized themes that emerged from their ongoing conversations. These promising practices reflect the shared ideas that ETC members expressed during the meetings, with a focus on those themes that were particularly prominent across multiple sessions.

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