

Challenge

American Public University System (APUS) currently provides Electronic Course Materials (ECM) to *undergraduate students* via a book grant which supplies all students with e-texts at no cost, a practice which helps our students succeed, but results in significant costs for the institution. Our *graduate students* must purchase their own course materials, often at considerable cost. We aim to reduce costs while providing our students consistently high-quality learning and collegiate and career success.

Solution

To meet the strategic goals articulated above, in 2017 APUS faculty and leadership began The Open Education Resources Conversion Project, which has enabled us to produce high-quality, interactive, multimedia rich courses using low-to-no-cost learning materials. The project has also re-engaged faculty in the important work of constructing and maintaining courses and programs; indeed, we accord the faculty an unprecedented level of control over what materials are used and how they are deployed. As a result we've realized significant curricular improvements along with reduced costs. We've reduced dependence on large publishers and thus increased our faculty's academic freedom. Academic subject matter experts used Intellus Learning software to convert no fewer than 220 courses from publisher e-texts to OERs. This project continues in 2018, with another ~230 courses targeted for conversion to OERs, bringing us to ~ 450 courses converted in 2 years. The Intellus software helps our faculty quickly identify Open Education Resources that align with a course's Learning Objectives. They include our own library database offerings; online videos and podcasts; and other educational websites, as well as offerings from OpenStax, MERLOT, and the OER Commons. Our faculty own this process. We established a "train the trainer" approach in which Program Directors first learned to use the software, and then trained their faculty. We engaged in discussions around what makes a good OER, providing opportunities for Directors to practice discriminating among a variety of available OERs as they identified, evaluated, and adopted alternate, no or low-cost ECMs for a sample, targeted course in their discipline. Directors subsequently trained faculty how to convert courses to high-quality OERs. Directors and faculty collaborated with APUS' Academic Instructional Technology (AIT) Team to create electronic Learning Format (eLF) versions of the new OER-enabled courses. Intellus-identified resources were tagged to allow us to gather analytic data on usage. Moreover, Intellus improves the student experience by generating automatic alerts whenever links break, suggesting potential replacements. Faculty were also encouraged to work with our Assessment Department to create or revise i-Rubrics for assessments as needed, and to revise forum posts, assessments and assignments whenever the inclusion of new learning materials required such changes. Librarians were available to assist throughout the process, and our Copyright team verified that all required licensing was in place as the project proceeded. APUS Classroom Support and Book List teams proved invaluable in ensuring that OER links were added to courses prior to being made available to students. This interdepartmental collaboration has enabled us to convert courses in every program we offer. Since we are both a national and international institution, with students located all over the world, OERs are being accessed globally as a result of this initiative. Students have access to these resources 24x7x365.

Learning Impact Outcomes

There have been somewhat mixed results in terms of student satisfaction. Some students, accustomed to downloadable texts, are adjusting. Other feedback has been quite positive, however, with many students praising the change to OERs as one for the better. We continue to collect and analyze data to monitor the project efficacy. Metrics of success, in addition to DFWI rates, include the Intellus-provided student engagement and usage analytics. These data enable faculty to measure which resources are used, how often, and for what period of time. As a result, the OER conversion has added new detail to our ability to assess and revise courses. At a higher level, this initiative also supports our mission of "Educating those who Serve," by offering respected, relevant, accessible, affordable, and student-focused online programs that prepare students for service and leadership in a diverse, global society.

Return on Investment

This project has already saved the University and students significant amounts of money (i.e. \$3M,) and those savings will continue to compound as more and more students register for OER converted courses. Savings will continue to grow exponentially as the project proceeds. Perhaps the most significant results, however, are the increased curricular control and freedom that faculty enjoy, and the improved accessibility for students residing or deployed all over the world.