***For Immediate Release***

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Exploring Alternatives to Expensive Textbooks Through Open Education

CEDAR CITY, Utah — The cost to attend college can be daunting. Tuition, housing and utilities add up quickly, and the cost of textbooks is one expense that continues to grow at an alarming rate. Open Education Week, which will be celebrated from March 5 through 9, is a global movement that is picking up traction. With a goal to share resources, tools, and practices to improve worldwide educational access and effectiveness, open education is combining the tradition of faculty-directed learning with 21st century technology.

Recognizing that traditional methods and high-priced textbooks pose a significant barrier for student success, Southern Utah University is working to make education more affordable and accessible.

“SUU has done something that I think is really impressive,” said [Dr. Richard Saunders](https://www.suu.edu/experts/profile/?expert=richardl.saunders), dean of library services at Southern Utah University. “We've put together a four-year initiative to systematically go through the General Education courses.  We're looking course-by-course to see what commercial texts we can replace with an open text.”

Through the university’s commitment to tackle this problem, SUU has hired one of the state’s first Open Education Resource (OER) librarians, Rosalyn Liljenquist, to promote and expand the use of open education resources and serve as an OER curator. OER materials include any type of educational materials that exist in the public domain or have been released under an open license that allows them to be used and redistributed with no access costs. In order to pursue the university's goals of building a repository of quality open resources, Liljenquist assists professors as they adopt materials that are tailored to their needs.

While many OER resources are available for nearly every field of study including history and the arts, gaps do exist. Explaining the nature of the holes, Liljenquist said, “While there may be an abundance of beginning algebra texts, there are fewer options for specialized, upper-division courses. There may be professors who see that gap, not only in the commercial textbooks but in the OERs as well.”

“I have gone without buying or renting a textbook mainly for my science classes because I couldn’t afford it,” said SUU student Veronica Rico. “I either took a picture of the book or went to the library to see if they have a book that I could check out.”

To meet deficiencies in the available materials, faculty memers like [Roger Gold](https://tbirdnation.suu.edu/faculty-friday-roger-gold-biology), associate professor of biology at SUU, have found innovative ways to create OER materials and offer unique educational opportunities to students. Inspired by an OER workshop he attended, Gold had a small group of students create its own open resource materials during his microbiology summer course. Gold split students into groups and had every group construct an informational website.

His goal was to give students an opportunity to gain valuable experience with real-world applications and a deeper understanding of the concepts of microbiology. Rico was one of Gold’s students and said she felt that creating OERs was more engaging than sitting in a class where a professor is merely reading slides.

“Overall, it helped me a lot, and it changed my view on microbiology,” said Rico.

Inspired by the success of his students this past summer, Gold plans to keep the student-created “wiki” for his other students to use as a study guide. He also taught two biology courses this fall and while he taught one using his traditional lecture and textbook, the other mirrored his summer course where students created their own OER materials. He will now review and compare the performance of both groups. Liljenquist will compile similar data for the university as it examines the effectiveness of OER in a unique multi-year, cross-curriculum study.

Textbooks play a big part in the cost of higher education. Students pay on average $1,200 per year on books alone. Usually, the expense for books is met directly out-of-pocket, and not with scholarships or financial aid. The cost for textbooks has risen [ninety percent](http://www.aei.org/publication/chart-of-the-day-the-astronomical-rise-in-college-textbook-prices-vs-consumer-prices-and-recreational-books/) in a period of eighteen years. The Consumer Price Index for textbooks has increased at a higher rate than that of new home prices and medical care. The high cost of these books has forced many students to reconsider purchasing the materials, even if it meant that going without the textbook could hurt their grades.

In a [recent episode of Solutions for Higher Education with President Wyatt](https://www.suu.edu/presidentspodcast/10/), Saunders discussed the cost of textbooks and how OER can be the solution to these high prices.

“It's a big cost and it's a big issue,” said Saunders. “It's something that affects every student one way or another at some point in their careers. The figure right now, and it's a pretty well established figure, is that approximately 70 percent of students who go to college—from the top to the bottom, from the ivies down to the community colleges—choose not to buy a textbook or textbooks in at least one of their classes each term.”

[Dr. Andrew Misseldine](https://tbirdnation.suu.edu/meet-our-professros-andrew-misseldine-mathematics), assistant professor of mathematics at SUU, published a [case study](http://library.suu.edu/ld.php?content_id=28579657) comparing students who used OER for their textbooks with students who used traditional textbooks. The case study found that both groups did well academically, but the class that used an OER textbook had fewer students drop the course.

“This follows the national trend that adopting OER materials seems to be helping students persevere in the class,” said Misseldine. “Disenfranchised students end up staying in the class, and probably passing the class where they may otherwise have dropped out because of money or other personal reasons that OER helps remedy.”

As students and faculty see the benefits of OER, SUU will continue to redesign and rethink its approach to education in order to meet their mutual and distinctive needs.

“SUU has a substantive role to play in improving student retention,” said Saunders. “This year the library faculty will work with the Center of Excellence for Teaching and Learning to encourage OER adoption by helping faculty select and adopt these materials.”

And for their part, SUU students are thankful for the adoption of OER usage and are looking forward to a wider application on campus.

“I’ve always appreciated my professors who take the time to provide OER materials for their courses,” said Miles Anderson, a senior political science and psychology major at SUU. “It really shows that they care about their students and are aware of the financial burden many students carry. Eric Kirby and Edrick Overson are both professors I have this semester who are using strictly OER materials. I hope other professors follow their example as they see that it can be done without sacrificing the quality of the course.”

“Faculty can adapt OER for their courses however they choose,” said Liljenquist. “That is the beauty of the Creative Commons License. They can piece together sections from different texts or lesson plans, add videos straight to Canvas, download and rewrite whole portions to fit the needs of the course. There really is no limit to what they can create with OERs.”

Liljenquist says her door is always open and she is ready to help faculty adopt and adapt these resources. She can also be reached at the [Sherratt Library](https://library.suu.edu/c.php?g=625695&p=4362934) and through her email address at rosieliljenquist@suu.edu.

**About Southern Utah University**

Established in 1897, Southern Utah University evolved from a teacher training institution to Utah's designated masters university, offering over 140 undergraduate and 19 graduate programs. With world class project based learning, unique undergraduate research opportunities, and a personalized learning environment (18:1) students lead projects mentored by professors. True to the University's core vision, SUU faculty, staff and administrators enable students to honor thought in all its finest forms, achieve excellence in their chosen field, and create positive change in the world.

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