# Sustaining OER Across the State University of New York (SUNY) System

## Capitalizing on State Investment by Creating an Educational Ecosystem

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## Capitalizing on State Investment by Creating an Educational Ecosystem

*From 2017 to 2020, the State University of New York (SUNY) saved students more than $47 million on textbooks[1] by enrolling 435,000 in more than 14,500 Open Educational Resources (OER) course sections across the SUNY System. This success was a direct result of the State's investment in the adoption, adaption, and creation of no-cost or low-cost course materials.*

*But how might SUNY continue this growth in OER materials and usage, following the state's original investment? rpk GROUP partnered with SUNY to create an OER sustainability framework and cohort implementation model, combining best practice approaches around necessary infrastructure, resources, and culture. This sustainability approach could be adapted and applied to other student success initiatives across the SUNY System.*

Since 2018, rpk GROUP has worked with SUNY OER Services and campuses across the SUNY system to design and implement sustainable business and operating models that support OER adoption and growth. This partnership began after the launch of SUNY's new state-supported investment in Open Education Resources[2] to reduce the burdensome cost of textbooks for students.

New York State provided the SUNY system with $4m in funding in 2017 to expand usage of OER on its campuses. This initial investment, as well as continued annual funding through 2020, has supported the creation and adoption of no-cost or low-cost course materials to improve student affordability and help faculty customize materials to align with their course objectives.

More than 50 SUNY campuses elected to participate in the state-funded OER initiative. Campuses were required to: 1) maintain their redesigned OER courses for three years; 2) develop an OER sustainability plan; and 3) provide the SUNY system with information on OER enrollments, student savings, and an accounting of financial resources received.

SUNY System Administration engaged rpk GROUP to develop a replicable framework and approach for OER sustainability, and then partner with SUNY campuses to create their own OER sustainability plans.

## Solution Design

During fall 2018, rpk GROUP created a new OER sustainability framework built around three key components (see Figure 1):

1) *Infrastructure:* policies, processes, and people necessary to support and grow OER programs,

2) *Resources:* program funding, reallocated revenues and time, fees, and efficient practices that impact the level of financial support required to sustain and grow OER programs, and

3) *Culture:* measuring, communicating and supporting OER activities and successes.

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1 https://www.suny.edu/suny-news/press-releases/02-20/2-4-20/2-4-20-oer-savings.html
2 Open Education Resources are free and openly licensed materials that can be utilized and re-purposed by others. The City University of New York (CUNY) system received a similar state investment.

Figure 1: OER Sustainability Framework



This framework was further supported through the creation of new resources, including a sustainability overview; the OER Field Guide for Sustainability Planning; and four OER case studies. In addition, two planning tools were developed: an OER Sustainability Self-Assessment, and an OER Sustainability Planning Guide and Template. (The latter mirrors the sustainability plan all participating campuses were first required to submit to SUNY OER Services in April 2019.)

Four SUNY campus OER teams helped to develop and test the framework and resources. This testing allowed for deeper exposure to sustainability and strategic finance concepts at the partner campuses, as well as feedback to maximize the utility of the resources produced.

## Implementation

SUNY System and rpk GROUP co-designed a series of workshops designed to ensure engagement with the new sustainability framework and resources, and support campuses in formulating their OER sustainability plans. The inaugural cohort of 16 campuses participated in a first-year and second-year round of workshops; a second cohort of 11 campuses launched in fall 2020.

While focused on an ultimate goal of developing their OER sustainability plans, campus cohort teams also created the following custom resources:

- **OER Guidelines** that describe the OER policies and procedures on their campuses;

- An **OER Financial Model** populated with campus-level data so campus teams could better understand program costs, revenue sources, student savings, and potential return on invest to the institution from changes in student retention and course taking;

- A short **'Pitch Deck'** that teams could use to communication with various campus audiences about local OER efforts, goals and the supports they needed in order to sustain OER on their campuses;

- And an **OER Infographic** designed to advertise OER course options to students.

The series of first-year workshops culminated with campus teams presenting their pitch decks to their campus administrators.

The second-year workshops took a deeper dive into topics identified by the cohort as areas requiring additional support. The workshops also highlighted ways to apply the sustainability concepts to other student success initiatives on their campuses. The cohort was also asked to update their OER guidelines and financial models.

## Key Lessons Learned

At the conclusion of the workshop series, the campus teams demonstrated a better understanding of the concepts around sustainability and how to apply them to OER initiatives on their campuses. Lessons learned include:

### 1) Sustainability is a Team Sport

The primary workshop participants were the 'OER champions' from each campus, but we quickly determined that a key to sustainability is building a broad coalition of support for the initiative. Sustainability efforts were directed at doing just that, from establishing clear and easy-to-follow guidelines, to 'pitching' new audiences on the benefits of OER to their respective campus.

It's essential for campuses to focus on grassroots (faculty and support staff) and grass tops (leadership and administration). This became evident as COVID-19 began impacting OER efforts at campuses. Many campuses lost support staff, such as instructional designers, and supporters, such as key administrators. Having tools like the pitch deck, guidelines, and the financial model ready to share with new hires was helpful in informing them about OER efforts.

This team approach builds a solid foundation for sustainability so that campuses no longer have to rely on a sole champion to push OER continuation and growth. Another lesson learned during COVID-19 was how this single champion approach quickly proved ineffective as burnout and stress set in. Champions were unable to carry the initiative alone, as many were also serving in critical capacities helping campuses transition to online learning.

### 2) Sustainability is not Synonymous with Money

Campuses did very different things with the OER funds provided to them from the SUNY system. Examples included hiring or re-purposing existing staff, investing in faculty development and other professional development, and paying faculty and administrator stipends to develop courses and maintain OER efforts. Regardless of the approach taken to use the funds, all campuses learned that the main resource utilized was actually not money; it was time.

Stipends rarely replaced the cost of the time needed to develop a course, and there were far more people involved in supporting OER than were paid a stipend or whose salary was covered by OER-specific funds. The resource that must be managed in order to achieve sustainability is time.

True sustainability requires vision, processes, communications support, and measurement. Knowing this, the tools created by rpk GROUP were intended to help reduce the time spent by campuses on OER administration so that resources—both time and money—could be targeted to support training and adoption.

### 3) Standard Framework Produces Custom Results

The OER framework is durable across campuses, but campuses may choose to use the framework to implement different process, procedures, and organization structures unique to their institutions, producing a custom campus result. Despite different approaches, most campuses implemented the elements in a similar pattern, first beginning with the infrastructure and then connecting dots to the rest of the framework.

All campus teams felt comfortable starting with the infrastructure, establishing guidelines, and drafting sustainability plans. However, they struggled with measurement, particularly the financial model. Participants were also initially skeptical about the pitch deck concept, concerned about the workload and its potentially promotional nature, but eventually were encouraged by the results as they shared their decks with administrators and other audiences. The deck's structure enabled them to clearly articulate the OER vision, goals, results, and sustainability needs.

### 4) Don't Forget the Students

Some of the workshops' liveliest speakers and discussions centered on engaging students. Most campuses focused on faculty recruitment and appealing to the greater good to scale OER. Yet little attention was paid to increasing student demand for OER courses by educating them on the benefits of OER and showing them how to find OER courses. Both approaches are helpful in building the broad coalition and demand needed for sustainability.

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**5) Cross-System Community Building**

Participants greatly appreciated the comradery of the cohort. All attendees openly shared challenges and triumphs and were generous with their time and resources as peers sought to learn from one another. Even if challenges were presented for which there was not a known solution in the group, it was rewarding for campuses to realize they were struggling with the same issues and going through difficult experiences together, particularly when COVID-19 impacted sustainability efforts. The cohort had very little attrition even as funds were reduced in 2020, which we attribute to the community benefit experienced by all campuses.

## Looking Ahead

Building on SUNY's desire to leverage the strength of its system, a significant opportunity exists for SUNY to capitalize upon its expertise around OER sustainability. The basic OER sustainability framework can be generalized and applied to initiatives beyond OER, and the SUNY system administration has expressed interest in applying this general yet durable framework across all new student success initiatives. The sustainability framework creates an opportunity for SUNY system to reshape its role as both a champion and partner to campuses as they move toward new, cost-effective learning models.

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