

SECTION II

Defining OER

DEFINITION OF OER

The term “open educational resource” means a teaching, learning, or research resource offered freely to users in at least one form and either resides in the public domain or has been released under an open copyright license that allows for its free use, reuse, modification, and sharing with attribution.

STUDENT-CENTERED BENEFITS OF OER

- ✓ Public Domain or Licensed for Public Use
- ✓ Access to Course Material at the Start of a Course
- ✓ Ongoing Access to Course Material
- ✓ Free (from cost)
- ✓ Free (from collecting student data)

The benefits of OER go beyond the benefits of other low-cost learning material options. While there are many published definitions, this group recommends the following definition from the [SPARC Policy Playbook](#)¹⁶ for policy audiences.

The term “open educational resource” means a teaching, learning, or research resource that is offered freely to users in at least one form and that either resides in the public domain or has been released under an open copyright license that allows for its free use, reuse, modification, and sharing with attribution.

This definition underscores that OER are freely accessible and reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free, perpetual use and repurposing by others. Since OER are freely available, students can rely on access from the first

day of a course or even before, and they can continue to access OER beyond the term in which they are enrolled in a course. Additionally, OER are available free in at least one format without requiring students to share their personally identifiable information. These student and faculty-centered characteristics set OER apart from other course material innovations and are described in greater detail below.

STUDENT AND FACULTY-CENTERED BENEFITS OF OER

Public Domain or Licensed for Public Use: When learning resources are available in the public domain or openly licensed for use, reuse, modification, and sharing, faculty may adapt and tailor resources to their specific course needs if they provide appropriate attribution. Open licensing makes it possible for faculty to respond quickly to the needs of students in their courses by ensuring the images and examples represent the students in their classes, inclusive language is used, and the course materials optimally support the course learning outcomes.

Access to Course Material at the Start of a Course: Students should start their classes with all the necessary course materials. However, students often encounter barriers to first-day access, such as how financial aid is disbursed or a bookstore's availability of used book options. Since OER are free in at least one, usually digital, format, all students have access to them when they start their courses and sometimes immediately after registering for a course.

Ongoing Access to Course Materials: Ongoing access to course materials is a significant benefit for students. It ensures they can access the materials they need to succeed while they are enrolled in courses and afterward, allowing students to benefit from those materials as they progress in their education. Also, if a student needs to repeat a course, it ensures they do not have to pay for the same resources more than once.

Free (from cost): Lower costs are a well-established benefit to OER. Students benefit when resources are free; giving more students access to course materials at no cost in at least one format from the first day of a course can help even the educational playing field. In some cases, students may incur costs if they choose to print copies of assigned OER, or faculty might make OER available through a learning management system that has an associated fee. When these resources are still available in one format for free, they are still considered OER; if they require students to pay fees, they may be more accurately described as low-cost. Such costs should be included in any student cost savings calculations.

Free (from requiring personally identifiable data): Not only are OER free from monetary costs to students, but they are also free of requirements

A NOTE ABOUT LICENSING

Learn more about **Creative Commons**, a nonprofit organization that “provides a menu of licenses that provide a standard way to grant copyright permissions for creative and academic works; ensure proper attribution and allow others to copy, distribute, and make use of those works.”¹⁷

KEY ENABLER FOR EQUITY

The elements identified here have essential equity implications. For example, when content is openly licensed, faculty can make adjustments to the content to ensure it is **relevant to and acknowledges the culture** and experiences of all students. Additionally, OER allows access for all students simultaneously, assuring no student must wait to access learning materials because of a lack of financial resources.

that students share personally identifiable or transactional data through a login process or via other means. Some digital learning materials platforms offer what could be misconstrued as OER due to the use of a zero-dollar cost platform requiring students to share personal information, including logging-in and tracking their individual use and behavior as they interact with course content. If students must provide personally identifiable data that can be used in future marketing efforts in order to access learning resources, then those resources are not truly free or open.

COMPARING OER TO ALTERNATIVE MODELS

The table below provides an overview of the most popular alternative approaches to lowering textbook costs and how they do and do not achieve OER’s student-centered benefits.

	IS THE RESOURCE...				
	Public domain or openly licensed?	Available when a course starts?	Available in perpetuity?	Free from cost in at least one form to students?	Free from personal data sharing?
OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES (OER)	Always	Always	Always	Always	Always
PRINTED COMMERCIAL MATERIALS RENTAL	Never	Sometimes	Never	Never	Sometimes
LIBRARY RESOURCES	Rarely	Sometimes	Never	Always	Always
LOW-COST PRINT OPTIONS OR COMPLIMENTARY RESOURCES OF OER	Always	Sometimes	Always	Never	Often
USED BOOKS OR OTHER ALL RIGHTS RESERVED MATERIALS WITH LOWER COSTS	Never	Sometimes	Sometimes	Sometimes	Often
INCLUSIVE ACCESS	Rarely	Often	Never	Never	Never

*The answers in this table are generalized; they may be different in different contexts.