Open Education Global Conference 2015 Submission

**Track:** Strategy

**Title:** The maturing OER ecosystem: partners, expansion, and critical questions

**Abstract:** (< 140 characters)
Partnerships between OER and the for-profit world are necessary for widespread adoption. How do we remain “true” to OER?

**Category:** Panel

**Three Key Words:**
Adoption
Growth
Sustainability

**Attached Paper:**

The OER movement is at a crossroads. While the academic advocates of OER continues to grow the overall course materials decision process is still trapped within an environment that has long been dictated by the textbook revision schedule. As traditional publishers begin to evolve their businesses from print textbook provider to digital learning services provider, OER as a movement finds itself advocating free and open content, even as the traditional publisher is redefining the value proposition of content itself.

With enough capital to develop technology solutions that embed their own proprietary content deep within a rich digital framework, traditional publishers are indeed changing the way they define themselves. New technologies are allowing for content to be delivered through adaptive and predictive online experiences for students. In order to take advantage of research-proven, machine-driven learning practices, OER needs to also redefine how content is delivered to students to best facilitate learning. However, how does an OER author or non-profit organization compete with the deep pockets of commercial publishers? How does one develop multi-million dollar technology solutions that are often required as part of the course materials adoption decision? The answer is by building a complete ecosystem that not only makes OER sustainable, but also makes OER material a much easier choice for adoption decision committees.

In order to disrupt the textbook business and provide positive change with the adoption decision process, OER needs to begin to work within the system. In order to work within the system, OER needs to bring the same value to open content that traditional textbook publishers are providing with their commercial
content. This includes editorial services and production quality, ensuring the content is consistent, accurate, error-free, and meets the most widespread criteria for full course inclusiveness. Grant-backed non-profit organizations, like OpenStax College, based at Rice University in Houston, Texas, work with both the open community as well as professional content development experts to ensure open texts meet this level of scrutiny. However, only achieving content parity with commercially produced textbooks isn’t enough to help OER cross the chasm.

In today’s adoption decision process, this content value proposition also includes a rich digital learning experience for students. Current research into the cognitive science of learning is not only changing how we view student learning, but is also changing the way teachers teach. And that is often best facilitated by a digital environment. Today’s students entering secondary and post-secondary educational careers have come to expect an immersive digital experience that better reflects their own lives. Learning for the current generation of students requires a highly engaging interactive experience. And technology solutions are not only expensive to develop, they are also expensive to maintain and support.

And even with the content parity and technology support, OER still faces the challenge of winning adoptions at scale. Beyond the passionate advocacy of the OER community, the adoption decision process is still largely influenced by the significant sales and marketing efforts of the commercial publisher. Non-Profit organizations such as OpenStax College are making significant strides in improving awareness of OER and overcoming the stigma of open that has previously slowed momentum of adoption. Partnerships with commercial organizations, such as WebAssign, bring immediate awareness and validation of the quality of OER content.

In order to maintain, improve, broaden, and sustain adoptions of OER, the OER community must look at creating and expanding a partner network with commercial providers to meet the evolving needs of the student. Yet, many open textbook authors consider these models unsettling when they do not receive royalties, yet corporations receive income. Many authors also find commercial partnerships to be contrary to the spirit of open educational resources. How do we solve this dilemma? Join this panel as it shares models for authors, non-profit organizations, and for profit corporate collaborations.

As part of this presentation you will hear two different perspectives:

The Author and Non-Profit Perspective:
Barbara Illowsky is co-author of the newly released *Introductory Statistics* by OpenStax College, the updated version of the “best seller” *Collaborative Statistics* in the Connexions collection. She will share how and why she and co-author Susan Dean continue to work with outside companies on developing partnerships, even when “they” earn money but the co-authors earn kudos.
Barbara will also discuss the how these partnerships can drive forking of basal content to create high quality OER options.

Through her relationship with the non-profit OpenStax College, an open text curator and publisher based out of Rice University in Houston, Texas, Barbara will discuss the requirements to make such organizations sustainable to ensure the continuation of the program beyond grant funding. Barbara will also provide perspective on “open” when fees are involved.

The For-Profit Perspective:
Mark Santee is the VP of Product and Marketing for WebAssign, a commercial online homework and assessment application. WebAssign partners with every major traditional textbook publisher to license and resell their textbook content through the WebAssign system. WebAssign supports hundreds of textbooks across math and science and reaches over 1.5 million students globally each year.

With 15 years of experience working for several of the traditional textbook publishers, Mark will discuss the overall transition from print to digital that academic publishing is currently undergoing. He will then discuss how the support of OER fits into WebAssign’s overall publisher partnership model and why OER continues to be a strategic imperative for the organization. Mark will also demonstrate how these types of partnerships can hasten positive disruption by fixing the broken economic model that currently exists in the market.

Goals/Intended outcomes include:
1. Attendees will understand the need for partnerships with for-profit corporations to produce and sustain innovation
2. Attendees will appreciate why partnering is not “selling out”

Intended audience: General