



# INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP ABSTRACTS

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## Inspiring Faculty Innovation: Open Educational Resources and Competency-Based Education as Pedagogical Change Models



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Every college has pockets of innovative faculty who are resourceful and skilled problem solvers. They come to you with solutions instead of complaints and when they leave your office you wish you could clone them. These faculty are your innovators. Academic innovation is currently getting a lot of attention. It is a concept that is trendy, as well as murky. What do we mean when we talk about innovation? In early 2018, a survey of academic administrators framed innovation as a tool for solving problems and driving overall improvement. When asked how to support innovation, Chief Academic Officers (CAOs) reported that it requires synergy between top-down and bottom-up approaches, supportive structures to channel the work, and faculty who are empowered and have a voice in

shaping initiatives. At Northern Essex Community College in Massachusetts, academic innovation has most recently focused on competency-based education (CBE) and open educational resources (OER).

Northern Essex faculty have a long tradition of initiating innovative approaches to meeting students' needs and supporting their success. Faculty who teach developmental English and reading courses were early adopters of accelerated models. Northern Essex has scaled accelerated developmental reading and writing course options, in particular the co-requisite model pairing developmental writing and English Composition. Math Pathways were created as an evidence-based approach to improving student's achievement. Three

pathways were created: a STEM pathway, a Middle pathway and a non-STEM pathway. This new approach to mathematics education shortens the math sequence, reduces transition points for students and provides the mathematics skills most needed in an academic program. As a result of these and other reform initiatives, the percentage of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students completing college-level math and English by the end of their first academic year increased 6% from 2012 to 2017.

Most recently, our faculty have led the region in the adoption of open educational resources and course-based competency-based education, innovative practices with benefits to both faculty and students. Both initiatives were fully supported by

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the college's president and vice president of academic and student affairs. The open educational resources initiative began as a Textbook Task Force, which was born out of student complaints about the high costs of textbooks that were raised at student forums held by Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs Bill Heineman. He tapped Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education Jody Carson and Coordinator of Instructional Technology Sue Tashjian to co-chair the task force. He provided \$5,000 to pilot an OER project. With the support of the task force, we designed the Adopt Open pilot to address the critical issue of college affordability and access; faculty received stipends and professional development to replace their commercial textbook with OER. These pioneering faculty committed to using OER for one year and agreed to share their materials under an open copyright license.

Since the initial OER pilot, additional grants have bolstered the work, resulting in more than seventy faculty members adopting or creating OER. The initial modest \$5,000 investment resulted in \$56,000 in textbook savings for students during the first semester the courses were offered using OER. With small amounts of additional grant dollars, that savings has grown to more than \$1.6 million for students over the last five years and savings continue to grow each semester.

What started out as a way to save students money has turned into so much more. The Adopt Open

project reenergized faculty around course design and assessment of student learning. "The use of OER in my classes has had a significant impact on student learning. Criminal Justice textbooks are often 2 years behind once they have been printed, reviewed, and then adopted by faculty. Our department's use of OER allows us to be more current and our assessment data demonstrates that our students are more engaged with the content," said Professor of Criminal Justice Scott Joubert.

Empowered by college leadership to be entrepreneurial, we broadened the scope of the OER work statewide and then to the New England region. The Massachusetts Community Colleges Go Open Project funded by the U.S. Department of Labor TAACCCT grant was a statewide collaborative project for community college faculty and staff. Led by NECC staff, Go Open brought together faculty from across the state to develop OER in order to address the rising cost of textbooks. As a statewide collaborative, Go Open positively impacted more than 9,000 students in the first year alone, with collective savings of \$1.2 million in textbook costs. This project allowed us to build momentum for further work in the area of open education in the Northeast by having a robust group of faculty champions on board.

Collaborating with other early adopters of OER from across the state and the country, we launched an annual Northeast Regional OER Summit that expands the reach of this work each year. Knowing we

had the support of college leadership, we were able to be creative in finding the resources needed to build on the work and expand it statewide. As a result, faculty from across New England have participated in design workshops to develop OER materials. This peer-to-peer professional development helps faculty rethink their approach to course design. Rather than choosing a textbook and allowing the chapters to dictate their topics for each week, we observed faculty using their student learning outcomes first to determine assessments and then adopting, adapting or creating appropriate OER to help students achieve them. What began as a solution to the rising costs of publisher textbooks has evolved into a pedagogical change strategy to improve student learning.

The development of the competency-based education initiative had a similar impact on how faculty view their courses. The outcomes of the course became the focus, and went one step further: what do faculty want students to be able to do when they have completed the course? Development of a CBE course begins with creating a competency map that aligns performance-based student learning outcomes with the learning resources and authentic assessments that aim to achieve the observable outcomes. According to Professor of English Dr. Elle Yarborough, "The intentional approach to adapting my English Composition course to CBE helped me realize that I had a class activity that my students and I really enjoyed, but was not connected to the learning outcomes of the course!

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The mapping of competencies to the content and assessments gave me a fresh look at the course design.”

The Northern Essex CBE journey began in 2015 when a team of faculty and administrators attended a national CBE conference targeting community colleges. The team brought the knowledge gained at the conference back to campus and designed an implementation strategy, resulting in Northern Essex being the first public higher education institution in Massachusetts to offer course-based competency-based education. Supported by a newly created dean of academic innovations position, the faculty had hands-on support in tackling the logistical, professional development, accreditation and regulatory challenges associated with creating a new instructional modality. Dean of Academic Innovations Dr. Kim Burns formed an implementation team of faculty and instructional designers who together explored how CBE courses required new approaches to course design, instruction, registration and student support.

Faculty launched online CBE courses in computer applications and art in fall 2016 and caught the attention of the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education (DHE). The DHE was interested in CBE as a mechanism to more quickly and efficiently

prepare early childhood educators to enter the force workforce and alleviate a severe teacher crisis. Since 2017, Northern Essex has a led a DHE grant funded consortium of Massachusetts community colleges to build the collective capacity of the system’s early childhood faculty to offer CBE early childhood courses, which allow practitioners in the field to apply their prior knowledge and work through a credential more quickly. Northern Essex plans to have a CBE early childhood associate degree available in 2021.

OER and CBE may be different movements in education, but their synergy is undeniable. Both require the use of backwards design, are focused on meeting learning outcomes, and involve deep conversations about teaching and learning. So, how and why were these two innovative projects so successful? Academic Affairs leaders balanced a top-down and grassroots approach by providing the vision, trusting faculty to implement the vision and then getting out of their way. They also provided resources and removed bureaucratic roadblocks.

Innovation is happening on your campus, whether it is widely recognized or occurring along the

periphery. You can nurture faculty innovation by empowering your faculty, providing resources and removing roadblocks. Use guiding questions to generate solutions rather than mandates or reasons why an idea won’t work. If faculty own the problem and the solution, they could make it happen in ways that are better than what you could have imagined. The most successful academic innovations come from the people who believe in them and have a stake in its success. When a problem is identified and change is needed, allow the ideas and strategy to emerge from the faculty and provide resources for pilot projects. Seed money and professional development go a long way in providing faculty with the tools needed to innovate. As our OER initiative demonstrates, even modest investments can achieve sizeable results. Creative faculty may also need your support to remove barriers, such as policies or ways of doing things that get in the way of trying out something new.

Community college faculty are innovative by nature. They know how to do more with less. They spend most of their time in the classroom and see the impact of innovations on their students, sometimes immediately. Trust them and they will innovate.

**Katherine Wesley**, Editor (ISSN 1551-7756) November 2019, Volume 11, Issue 3

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