

Open Education Rising Podcast ([www.openeducationrising.net](http://www.openeducationrising.net))

Hosted by Deep Shenoy

**Transcript of Episode 2: Dr. Richard Sebastian, Part 1: Achieving the Dream's Z-Degree Initiative**

Deep: Hello, and welcome to Open Education Rising, a podcast about growing and improving open education. I'm your host, Deep Shenoy.

Deep: Today's guest is Dr. Richard Sebastian, who is the director of Achieving the Dream's OER degree initiative. We met up at the Open Education Conference in October 2018 in Niagara Falls, New York, which we reference in our discussion. I'm posting our conversation over two episodes. This episode is focused on what Achieving the Dream, or ATD, is doing with its degree initiative. Part two, in a future episode post, will focus on the big picture about the future of open educational resources, or OER.

Deep: In this episode, Richard talks about ATD's z-degree program. The z-degree program is a grant program covering 38 community colleges in 13 states that are developing entire degrees using OER. The grants not only serve to help with OER adoption, but are also funding research. For example, they look at the cost of adopting OER in terms of faculty and other staff time, which could be a helpful number to you if you're trying to write a budget for an OER initiative. I'll put a link to the report in the show notes so you can take a look if you're interested. Now here's the first part of my conversation with Richard.

Deep: Could you just say a little bit about what the OER degree initiative's focused on?

Richard: The OER degree initiative is a three-year project, funded by the Hewlett Foundation, as well as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Great Lakes, some other smaller foundations, the Shelter Hill and Speedwell foundations. The goal of the initiative is focused on OER degree pathways, so that model of OER degree adoption. There's really two parts to this effort. The first is we're supporting 38 communities colleges across the U.S., so 38 colleges in 13 states, to build these OER degree pathways over the course of the grant. They get funding to do that, to pay faculty, for the necessary expenses that come with that. They get support as part of this grant. They get technical assistance support from Lumen Learning, provides support around licensing and professional development around awareness of OER and adoption.

Richard: There is a community practice element to it, so kind of really helping faculty become part of the broader open community. That is being led by Community College Consortium for Open Educational Resources, CCCOER. They're partnering with us. Our other partner is SRI Education and RPK Group. They're research organizations, and they're part of that other part of this initiative, which is the research and evaluation of it, to answer some questions about this model of OER adoption, to look at the academic outcomes for students, to look at implementation, what works, what does it really take to start to build out an OER degree pathway effort. Also, really this is the focus of RPK Group, is the costs, a cost study. How much do these students actually save? How much

does it really cost institutions to do this? What might it cost for other institutions to do it? Those are the broad outlines of the OER degree initiative.

Richard: Currently, we're two and a half years into it, so for the colleges, it's kind of wrapping up this semester. The last of the courses will be taught and the degrees finished, and the remaining part of the grant is the analysis and research, putting together the final parts of that.

Deep: Are you guys going to do a report or anything coming out of it or publish any of the data?

Richard: Yeah. So it's funny that you should ask. We're at Open Ed right now on Thursday. Tomorrow our second research report will be released.

Deep: I will put in the show notes the link to it, so if folks want to read it.

Richard: Yeah, that would be great. We had a report that came out last year, last June, that we released, that your listeners can also download and read. There will be one more at the end, so next September 2019, the big report, final report is coming out, which is going to include outcomes data, students who went through these degree pathways, what were their outcomes. Did it help them with completion? Did their performance improve? What were their cost savings and things like that? That's been a really important piece of this effort. It's a pretty big effort, 38 colleges. It's got a lot of arms to it to be able to take the time as well to look deeply at what colleges are doing and learn something from them really engaging pretty intensely with OER over a short period of time, is going to be really valuable, I think, for other institutions.

Deep: Are there any top line conclusions or anything you can share with the listeners?

Richard: I think I would hesitate to call them conclusions since we're still-

Deep: In the middle.

Richard: ... in the middle of this.

Deep: Yeah, got you.

Richard: I want to be careful with that. I think there's some interesting things in there. This report, unlike the last one, includes data on students. There were student surveys and student interviews that have been included in the report. They were asked about their experiences in an OER course or multiple OER courses. It's pretty much off-the-charts positive. It's a really good thing. I mean, they, for the most part, were really receptive to OER, thought they would take another OER course, felt more engaged to the course. We were pretty pleased at that piece of how students felt about participating in these courses, because that's important both for faculty to hear as well what the student perspective is. Maybe the not so good news around that is students really didn't know

about OER going into this. They may have just learned about it from the first day of class. Some of them learned when they were taking the survey [crosstalk 00:06:04]

Deep: That's interesting. I didn't know I just did that.

Richard: I get that. I think there's a lot to do when you're putting together these kind of pathway of courses and you're connecting it to all your college systems and trying to get it off the ground. I think maybe colleges are a little cautious when maybe they only have one or two sections of a course that are OER, to really heavily promote it since the demand may outstrip the supply that they have. But, still, I think that's a really important ... It's a valuable thing to do, to make students aware and to help maybe push some of the adoption more quickly. I think it's also a lost opportunity for really promoting it maybe more broadly to make a degree program more attractive or to bring in students who can maybe comparison shop and say, look, you can get all your textbooks for free in this business program, as a selling point. So we're hoping that those were kind of just growing pains and that we'll see, by the end of this, that there's a little bit more awareness, student awareness at least, around these programs.

Richard: The report is pretty ... It's got several pieces to it, but another thing that stands out from it is the cost analysis. This is the first report that we've done that has really included cost data. I struggled with this when I was director of teaching and learning technologies for the Virginia Community College system. I remember, really, just first starting there, I had limited awareness about OER, so I started asking my colleagues, "How much do students pay for textbooks generally? What does that cost?" thinking that someone would walk over and pull up the data or whatever and say, well, we did a survey of all the colleges. No one knew. No one even really knew to ask that question at that point.

Richard: So when I was running grant programs in Virginia and really the expectation was ... And a focus for me was cost savings, really. How much can we save students was an important thing to do. Calculating that, how much ... Well, you could say, well, here's the cost in a bookstore of the physics textbook. There's 20 students in the physics class, so you multiply that cost by 20. Then that number is how much money you save. But we all know and knew then that that's not how students ... That's not their purchasing behavior, right? Some buy used. Some rent. Some go shopping online and find discounted versions. Some don't buy it at all. The community at large has really struggled over the years to really figure out what does this mean. How do we calculate cost savings? Somewhere along the line, I think we settled on \$100 per course-

Deep: The average?

Richard: Yeah, per student, right. That was based on, really, a big set of data. It just kept coming around to that number. I think the thing that I see that this report offers is a new way and a more accurate way of calculating that. We can finally arrive at kind of a more realistic agreed upon way of determining savings broadly. So with this report, we looked at not only ... We looked at the cost of a bookstore textbook as a kind of baseline, and certainly that is one way of doing it. We had another scenario that we came up with, which was based on student buying behaviors, so a percentage that buys from other ways, other methods. We looked at the cost to the institution of an OER degree course,

how much it costs to pay a faculty member to do this, how much it costs to do these other things. So there's an offset to that original number to come at what is the savings, so it's not just how much students have saved, but actually including that institutional investment. So it's lower than the \$100 [crosstalk 00:10:04]

Deep: Yeah, yeah.

Richard: But I think it's going to be a really valuable tool for colleges to get a more realistic idea of the costs and the benefits of OER courses and developing OER.

Deep: I think, for better or worse, a lot of stakeholders like to hear what the savings number is. So I think a lot of people listening to this podcast, if they're OER advocates, have been or will be in a position to try to calculate that number.

Deep: I think advice on that will be, I think, helpful.

Richard: Here's a more concrete way of doing that, if you really want to know an accurate or more accurate way of doing that. I think that's actually a really great actionable piece of research that's coming out with this report that's going to be really useful, and so I'm happy about that. There's other findings in there that are generally positive. Another thing that's emerging, and really is emerging ... There's not a whole lot of concrete things, but definitely it's a sense that faculty are looking at pedagogy around OER, looking at other things besides just making this switch, publish your textbook to OER, but actually looking at or thinking about OER and what some opportunities are for them to teach differently or engage their students more. That was good news too, and that's going to be really interesting to see in the follow-up report if that has grown over this past year with the faculty.

Deep: The schools participating in your program, were many of them new to OER, or people already had a degree? What was the mix of experience of [crosstalk 00:11:46]

Richard: It was a very purposeful mix, and on a lot of levels. We were very intentional about the colleges that were selected, which also made it hard, because we turned down a lot of really good proposals just because we had maybe an imbalance around that. We looked at urban, rural institutions. We look at the demographic makeup of the student body to make sure that we're reaching different populations of students. We looked at size. We looked at geography. That's where a lot of the imbalances were. We had a lot of Texas schools applying, and it could have shifted to a big chunk of them were Texas schools. We looked at that. We certainly wanted some of the institutions that were kind of at the forefront of z-degrees or whatever they call it, OER degrees, to be part of it, to give them a little bit more momentum and maybe some early wins with that. Then we also really wanted to see how does this work for brand-new inexperienced colleges that really don't have a whole lot of experience, just to really build it from the ground up. Can they do that as well as these other institutions?

Richard: One of the surprising things that we found was those institutions that were experienced, had an OER degree, kind of the opposite happened. They actually got out of the gate

more slowly. That was because, if you're an institution, how you define z-degree or OER is important. What we found is our expectations of an OER course wasn't necessarily what theirs were, so they actually had to go back and rework these courses, kind of retrofit them to qualify [crosstalk 00:13:41]

Deep: Was that because there were some things that were-

Richard: [crosstalk 00:13:43] library resources or something, that we require the materials to be all openly licensed, and many of them weren't. We found that surprisingly ... or too our surprise. It wasn't surprising if we had thought about it, but we didn't see them shooting out of the gate, and it was a little frustrating because the faculty was frustrated at having to rework these courses, but we learned from that.

Richard: Then kind of on the opposite end of that with the brand-new institutions, they had some really, really ... It was a tough, tough climb for them, I think, to get these things off the ground, because they had to do not only just the technical work of building OER courses and getting faculty involved in it, but the kind of culture shift that they needed to make at their institution in order to bring in their IT people and their administration and get everybody on the same page, which kind of happened at many of the other grantee institutions just from their experience. But in the end, I think we're pretty pleased with the outcome so far. Again, not all institutions are going to make it to the finish line. I'm using air quotes.

Deep: For the audio listeners of this podcast, there were in fact air quotes-

Deep: ... that we just saw now.

Richard: ... official air quotes. There's some courses, that they're not complete degree programs. They're going to be spilling over to the spring and things like that, and that's to be expected. Many of our grantee colleges finished early. Some finished multiple degree programs early. But you see kind of a different level of performance based on a lot of things they couldn't control, like staff turnover or leadership changes, things that, being part of the community college system, that you expect. But for the most part, I think, we've seen what we really think is important, is not necessarily counting courses and degree programs, but as this grant wraps up, is this work going to continue in some way? Has it shifted or changed, at an institution, the conversation so that they now see this as, really, kind of a viable way of addressing some student success issues and cost issues and things? We feel pretty positive about that. There's still going to be struggles for sustaining these degree programs for many of the institutions. [crosstalk 00:16:09] a lot of challenges there. Again, I think there's a role for the community, and there's a role for Achieving the Dream to provide additional supports for that. But I really don't see many of them just throwing up their hands and saying we're done with this. We had this grant, and now we're moving on to something else, that it really makes sense on some level to continue these efforts.

Deep: As you mentioned before, for our listeners, this is October 2018, and we are at the Open Ed Conference in Niagara Falls. I have met a lot of people here from schools who haven't

really gotten going with OER yet. They may have started something or they think there's some OER at their campus. They don't know. Now they want to give it more support. Have you ever seen anything like a guidebook or anything that gives people a place to start if they are really on page one? I have gotten this question a lot this week. I literally don't know what step one is. Do you have thoughts on where they could look?

Richard: Do they have a goal, or do they just want to get OER going?

Deep: Get OER going and building the supports on campus. They're like, okay, I want to have more robust OER at my campus. I kind of don't know what to do.

Richard: I take your point. I think there are resources, and they're generally open resources that can help with different approaches. We're certainly developing those out of this grant to help colleges. Lumen Learning just put out their ... I think it's the OER Champions Playbook.

Deep: Yeah, I've seen it. It's pretty robust.

Richard: They call them plays, so things you can do to kind of build that champion culture and to try to make those kind of conversions to OER. I think SUNY, they have some resources on adoption and things like that. That said, broadly, I think Achieving the Dream, from the standpoint of our organization, we see that, to be successful, they have to be faculty-led. If you hear faculty asking this question [crosstalk 00:18:16] champion, kind of the folks who are early adopters who recognize this, then that's great, because the successful programs really start at the grassroots level. That's not enough. At some point, you need to have official institutional support to recognize those efforts and then invest in them somehow so they can keep going. That is absolutely essential.

Richard: The first thing we tell colleges, even in an informal way, is, if it's coming from a president or a VP, it's like, well, what's going on with your faculty? What do they think about this? Well, we're going to introduce it to them. Well, then you really need to get them on board and see what that level of enthusiasm and acceptance is of this for faculty, so that's really crucial. One of the things that we see as important to come out of this project, for us ... Achieving the Dream does more than ... Really, Achieving the Dream's focus is on whole institution transformation. So when we have community colleges join our network, it's a membership network, they go through a three-year experience where they really look at data. They look at, really, in a clear-eyed way, what's going on and how do we move the student success needle. Then they focus on an area to improve.

Richard: One of the ways they do that is through what we call an ICAT. It's a way of looking at different capacities and where you stand with it and where some challenges are. We're adapting that, to some extent, for colleges that are interested in OER. The ones you describe, it hasn't really taken off. There's not a whole lot going on, but there's some interest, kind of probe that to assess where they are, to ask them some questions about really kind of essential things that they need to have in place or should have in place or should be thinking about, which will hopefully be helpful [crosstalk 00:20:13]

Deep: Well, I think a lot of people that I've talked to this week would appreciate that, just in terms of having some sense of [inaudible 00:20:21] ... I mean, you could also start and then make mistakes and discover it. But could you actually at least start out with some kind of blueprint in this ... like an instructional ... A lot of conversations about, well, how much instructional design support do I need, you know? Just what are some things you ought to be thinking about? I think the instructional design support seems to come up, questions about the technology. I've heard a lot of those think week. Where do we need to be in terms of how do different systems interact with each other? What [inaudible 00:20:50] need to be doing? So some of these questions seem to come up over and over. I think if you guys have observations about what a good level is to be in some of these things, I think people would really appreciate that.

Richard: That kind of gets to our emerging thinking as an organization over this initiative. I think you're here at Open Ed, and I think this is maybe in the water as well. I'm hearing it a lot, articulated a lot at some of the sessions I'm going to. For us as an organization, our goal is not to scale OER. That is a method for something else. For us, it's to help institutions help their students be more successful, to complete their educational goals, as well as contribute out to the community once they're done. How does OER impact that? What is the role of OER?

Richard: We've more and more come to see open educational resources, whether it's individual courses, whether it's degree pathways, or whether it's departmental adoptions, but some kind of institutional scale or level OER projects as firmly in teaching and learning space of a college, and that, when it's placed there in something like ... You brought up instructional designers, like a center for teaching and learning or a center for faculty development, a place where you can invest in the expertise and the resources, be a little bit more strategic about this and think what are our teaching and learning goals. We're implementing Starfish. How does it connect with this? We're doing guided pathways. So rather than thinking about all these different efforts that are going on and how do you spread your resources, how do they support each other? How can you connect them as a way of thinking about the real goal of this, which is student impact? Cost savings contribute to that and billing OER courses and changing faculty, but I think it's really important to put some framework around it and a way of thinking about it.

Richard: As an organization, we have an earlier model of this, which is, when we began working with many of our member institutions, in order to improve or change student outcomes, your graduation rate or whatever you're looking at, you need to look at your data. You need to disaggregate it by ethnicity and socioeconomic status and Pell eligibility, things like that. What we found out was that many of the community colleges, they couldn't do that. They didn't have a place to do that. Institutional research departments weren't really uniformly part of community college structures. We had to focus on that. How do we build out your capacity to do that, to collect your data and look at it in that way?

Richard: Really, it's a similar ... probably end up taking a similar approach here. It's like, how do we build a culture of teaching and learning in institutions through a center like that? You already have a center? Great. How do you-

Deep: Make it better?

Richard: ... reorient it towards that? If you don't, how can we help you build out that capacity? But I think it needs some kind of real organizational structure, because we're talking about pretty significant scale. You're talking about lots of adjunct faculty that are part of community colleges. How are you going to train them around OER and what it means? That can be resource heavy. Then how are you going to continue to maintain these materials? So you have to find a way, I think, to systematize and build a process for supporting these things. Doing that as early as possible, I think, is wise.

Deep: Thank you so much for joining me for this episode of Open Education Rising! If you found this podcast helpful, please let your friends and colleagues know about it. Subscribe to it in your podcast player to be notified of future episodes.

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Until next time, take care!