

Hosted by Deepak Shenoy

Transcript of Episode 8: How Houston Community College is Scaling Up OER

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Steve: I think it's really important for any institution that's trying to seriously get into this to, number one, have a full-time OER coordinator, and I think also to come from the ranks of faculty.

Deepak: Hello, and welcome to Open Education Rising, a podcast about growing and improving open education. I'm your host, Deep Shenoy. I often get asked this question, "How do I scale up OER on my campus?" There are many different ways to answer that question, and on today's episode I profile the approach taken by Houston Community College.

At the OpenEd Conference in Niagara Falls in October 2018 I had the chance to sit down with Doctor Steven Levey, Nathan Smith, and Amy Tan of Houston Community College.

We talked about several topics such as having a full-time OER coordinator, setting up an OER steering committee, how to track and measure OER, the advantages and challenges of Z-Degrees, how to talk about the financial impact of OER, how to provide instructional design and professional development support, and perhaps most importantly for sustainability putting OER in the institutional strategic plan.

Nathan's written up a case study that provides additional details, and you can find a link in the show notes. I enjoyed this interview because it really comes through that these three colleagues are passionate about OER and like working on it with each other. That left me feeling energized, and I hope you feel that energy too. Now, here's my conversation with Steven, Nathan and Amy.

Steve: I am Steve Levey. I'm the associate vice chancellor for academic instruction at HCC. It's a district-wide associate vice chancellor position.

Deepak: Very nice.

Nathan: I'm Nathan Smith. I'm philosophy faculty and the OER coordinator, so that's a full release, full-time position to manage the OER program.

Amy: I'm Amy Tan, and I'm the dean for English and communications, which is also a system-wide district role. All the programs in English, speech, communications, and sign language report up to me.

Steve: If anybody who's listening to the podcast, or anybody who really wants to start a Z-Degree or start a really serious open educational resource effort at their college, I think

one of the things that they need to commit to is finding an individual who is going to work on a full-time basis to do that. We've found a wonderful person, Nathan here, is doing a great, great job.

Our former vice chancellor and I had a couple of meetings trying to figure out how we were going to go about doing this. The shortage of funds being what they are at every college or university and particularly community colleges, we got a little creative with it and said, "No, we're not going to set aside X amount of dollars to pay a salary to an individual and try to find that somewhere in the budget."

We were going to give a full release to an existing faculty member. That killed two birds with one stone. It lessened the cost. It didn't make it zero, because we still had to backfill the courses for the courses that Nathan was teaching, but it really saved us a significant amount of money. Also, the other important thing I was going to mention is that it was critically important that we had that individual come from the ranks of faculty. That was really, really an important concept.

Deepak: Why was that? Why [crosstalk 00:03:20] that important?

Steve: Because if someone like an administrator like me comes along and says, "This is something we want to do," or we just had an executive director position or a director position in doing that, that person was not for lack of a better term one of them. Couldn't identify with them. Hadn't grown up in the ranks. Hadn't been doing this kind of teaching nearly as much, and wasn't as much of a complement to them, complement with an E, a complement to them as a faculty member would have.

It was a much more powerful and much more influential thing to have a faculty member come from their own, an individual come from their own ranks and become the OER coordinator.

Deepak: Then were you already involved with OER at that time, Nathan?

Nathan: Yeah. I had been teaching my classes using OER for probably five or six years, and so I was pretty familiar with it. We came to the OpenEd Conference in Richmond in 2016.

Amy: It was right after the summer that [Kendra 00:04:26] came to us.

Nathan: Right. When Kendra came to us, that must have been when we started scheduling to go, because we realized we needed to learn a little bit more. For me that was really eyeopening. Like I said, I've been aware of the creative commons licensing from a long time back, and then I had been using OER, but to come to the conference and see all the research that's going on, learn about open practices and open pedagogy and all of this other language around OER, suddenly that became a big deal.

We had been also members, I should highlight, we had been members of the Community College Consortium on OER, which is under the Open Education

Consortium. Actually, Angela Secrest and Lorah Gough were founding members of that in 2006.

Steve: Our librarian and our director of distance education at the time.

Nathan: We had been involved, and I had been on the listserv for a long term, but as a faculty member, you know out emails, I didn't follow it all that closely. After coming to OpenEd and I started following a little bit more closely and getting involved, and then once it became a full-time position then I got really involved, and now it's just like, "Wow." There's this whole community, which is really cool.

Amy: I would say, too, that Nathan and Steve both co-chair the Instructional Materials Council for the system, and so that was the council that set all the policies for textbook adoptions, for any kind of instructional material, and so any question, any controversy that all went through the IMC, and they met annually and then every now and then when there was a necessity.

Like Nathan mentioned earlier, there were sub-committees from that council. Then when we started this, the Z-Degree, we formed informally at first a committee that we started calling the OER steering committee. It started off kind of small, a couple of deans, the associate vice chancellor, faculty member.

Then whenever we realized we had a question, we were like, "How does this impact financial aid? Well, we'd better put somebody from student services on our committee." It just started growing, and to now we have I mean it's a big steering committee, but it's cross functional. I mean we have-

Deepak: Can you name some of the functions?

Amy: We have testing. We have financial aid represented. We have registration represented. We have ...

Nathan: Libraries.

Steve: Libraries.

Amy: Libraries.

Steve: IT.

Amy: Information technology, online, the online dean. Lorah Gough who was director of online has been on it, Angela Secrest. Angela was so important to OER and I think she tried so hard in her role as librarian, but I think even she was thrilled to welcome a partner who was a faculty member to lend credibility to what she had already been doing.

Deepak: I think one of the questions that's come up, as Steve mentioned before we're all at OpenEd recording this podcast, that's come up this week has been about OER coordinators. I liked the faculty component of it. Nathan, from your standpoint if someone else was putting together an OER coordinator job description or looking for someone for the role, what are some of the other skills you've needed besides OER?

I come at this from a change management perspective, and I see lots of issues that have nothing to do with instruction. What are some of the other things you need to be able to do to be a successful OER coordinator?

Nathan: That's a good question. There is a list of job duties and responsibilities that are going to depend on the way you're implementing the OER program. For instance, for me a big portion of what I do is work with chairs to schedule classes for the Z-Degree because we have to make sure that there's a structured schedule, and I have to make sure that the faculty who are assigned to those courses have been trained in OER.

If you had a different structure, if you're not doing a Z-Degree maybe you would have less of that. The general qualities, I would say, I think which go more to your question, are going to be ... I'll just say this, as an OER coordinator, when I was a chair ...

I think you need someone who can be a faculty member and have a faculty voice but also has a capacity for the administrative side of things, so someone who can work with other people, who can manage their own time, who can delegate tasks to people, who understand that management aspect, but different from other management positions in the college.

For instance, I was a chair for some time, and in that role most of my workflow came to me. I would have a schedule. I would need to do scheduling. Student complaints would come to my desk. Faculty issues, like I would have to supervise faculty and all that stuff. The flow came to me, but as an OER coordinator you are promoting everything, so that your workflow is generated from yourself.

You need someone who is self-motivated and who has the capacity to set their own schedule and produce their own workflow, essentially.

Deepak: It's a proactive role, not a reactive role.

Nathan: Exactly. That's the way to ...

Amy: It's a little bit of sales.

Nathan: It's a little bit.

Deepak: Talk about that a little bit, your role as a marketer for OER.

Nathan: A lot of what I do is talking to people, like sitting on the phone and having a conversation with a program coordinator who's frustrated with the fact that he's got a

review an open educational resource, or talking to a faculty member who's like, "Well, I'm not sure my chair is going to support if I do this." Then talking to the chair and making sure that they can understand what we're asking and how it works.

There's a little bit of that. I also do a fair bit of training, so we have a training certificate program where you can get an OER certificate. I do six workshops a semester where I go out. You need someone who, I think, is an effective communicator. I think that is important, and then someone who works well with others, who can smooth over the rough areas and broker deals. I think there's a little bit of that that has to happen.

Amy: Humility, a good listener.

Nathan: Absolutely.

Amy: Even though you're really passionate about something, you have to be able to listen to alternative perspectives, and with an open heart and an open mind. I'm going to try to see what your objections are.

Steve: And provide substantive responses to individuals who are still skeptical of open educational resources. There are plenty of them still that exist.

Deepak: Give the listeners roughly a sense of the size, like if you said just as of right today how many students are doing this and how many faculty are in the OER loop right now roughly?

Nathan: One of the things that I always try to do is I give two different sets of statistics, so we can talk about the Z-Degree program, and then I like to talk about the general OER effort as a separate thing. I like to use the language, and this actually comes from Jason Pickevance at Salt Lake Community College, the idea of a vertical strategy versus a horizontal strategy.

You can think of a horizontal strategy as go to courses, course program-level adoptions, pick out high enrollment courses, try to promote OER, work with willing faculty. Then the vertical strategy is to build a degree plan from start to finish. That would be the difference.

In the Z-Degree as of this semester, fall 2018, we have over 2,000 students enrolled. We're at four physical campus locations plus online. We have about 80 sections, and that's 21 or 22 courses, 22 courses. That's 40 faculty. Then in the broader OER, we're still trying to get a good grasp on exactly how many people we have using OER.

The best data we have is basically from surveys. We've administered several surveys, and so we figure that there's about 100, maybe a little over 100 different faculty who are at least teaching one course that's a completely OER course. We suspect that that's impacting, that could be impacting 9,000 students.

Amy: I also think that's pretty low, because we have a lot of faculty ...

Steve: I do too.

Amy: ... who are out there just doing it and not necessarily-

Deepak: They don't know what it is.

Amy: Well, or they're not communicating it. They're just doing it quietly.

Steve: Right, or they haven't responded to the survey, for example.

Amy: Right, or it's only partially OER.

Nathan: There's some of that.

Amy: Just to give you perspective, we have around 900 full-time faculty, so we're talking a little over 10% there.

Nathan: Well, when I include the 100, that's part-time and full-time. I would say probably two thirds or even three quarters of them are probably full-time. I think you've got two issues in tracking this stuff. One is actually getting a real number on who's actually using OER, but the other is confusion over what OER is.

A lot of faculty might think, "Well, yeah, I use TED Talks in my course, and therefore it's OER."

Deepak: Have you guys set a standard? Have you told them it has to be 100%?

Nathan: We don't.

Deepak: In New York it's 51%. Is there a guidance about what?

Nathan: We do have a definition of what counts as an OER for HCC. We have a definition of OER and then we have a definition of open, and we do allow the use. For instance, in open we allow the use of freely available resources that are on either the open web or through the library that are free to students, they're openly accessible but they may not be openly licensed.

Deepak: Open license.

Nathan: We allow that, and then we decided early on that we were going to focus our measurement and our marketing to students on the cost rather than the license. Instead of talking about open courses or open OER, and then the tagging in the student system, instead of doing that it is a zero-cost textbook class. We have a ...

Deepak: Or low cost.

Nathan: ... lost cost, which is less than \$40 for all of their instructional materials. That's what we use. I think they're the attractions.

Deepak: Which I imagine makes a lot more sense. It tells me as a student what am I getting out of this.

Nathan: That's what we thought.

Steve: Or what does it cost to get into it is really the ...

Deepak: It's a great way to put it.

Amy: I think this is going to be nothing new, but we found that a lot of our faculty they really are motivated by saving our student. They do have a commitment to our students and to our mission, and so that is part of their interest. Of course, like other faculty, they're also motivated by academic freedom.

We have a two commercial textbook policy, so a program when they're making their adoptions they can have two commercial textbooks on their approved adoption list, but they can have unlimited OER. That was something we did, what, five, six years ago.

Steve: A long time ago.

Nathan: 2012. Yeah. 2012.

Amy: Yeah. 2012.

Steve: Yeah. A while back, yeah.

Amy: I think they're motivated by that also, and then I think a lot of them are motivated, I think you mentioned earlier, they're just frustrated with the bookstore and students not having the books on the first day of class. This is a really simple solution.

Steve: Another frustration the faculty have related to this also, which is beginning to diminish, too, is finding the right OER materials to start with. That's beginning to diminish. We have good resources with our library to be able to do it. I know libraries across the country are getting better and better at it.

A lot of faculty who still want to save students money do get frustrated in that they're not able to find the right materials to be able to start utilizing and build either a free course or a reduced cost course. That is still a remaining frustration.

Deepak: We were talking earlier about you mentioned you have the Z-Degree programs and then there was other OER that people are doing. I like that you made reference to the horizontal and the vertical. What if somebody was doing horizontal OER, they've got some courses everywhere, and thinking of should I be doing degrees or not? What are

the advantages of going to Z-Degree and what are the challenges of that particular way of approaching OER?

Nathan: I think the biggest advantage for going in the Z-Degree is it has a galvanizing effect on campus. People really get behind the notion of a Z-Degree.

Deepak: You don't have to tell anybody. You say Tidewater, like it's almost become a brand.

Nathan: Yeah. The Z-Degree has become kind of a brand, and then California has the zero textbook degrees, the ZTC degree. Now, in Canada they have the Zed Cred. It has become a thing.

Steve: There's a good marketing benefit. There's a good PR benefit to having a Z-Degree also. When you say you have a Z-Degree, people are just like, "Wow." People who aren't in education or people who are not familiar with what we're doing [crosstalk 00:19:09]-

Deepak: A parent might be like, "Go with that."

Amy: The parents are definitely ...

Steve: It's got a huge wow effect to it. It really does.

Nathan: Does yeah. Really does.

Steve: It's a good marketing vehicle for the college, too, overall.

Amy: It is also about completion and retention.

Steve: That's the end result. You're right.

Amy: And social justice. What is it, like 60%, 75% of our students are on Pell Grant, right?

Nathan: I think it's 45.

Amy: 40%, 45%.

Steve: No. It's like 40 to 45.

Amy: Okay. I was a little over there.

Deepak: It's still substantial.

Steve: I believe more than half are on some kind of financial aid.

Amy: Financial aid, so maybe that's what I was thinking. It's a pretty high number. When you think about the students in our classroom having to make a decision between am I going to pay the electricity bill or am I going to buy my economics book, and am I going to go

to the grocery store or am I going to have a math book. Those are the kind of decisions that our students are faced with.

Our faculty really are moved by that. We've added other initiatives that go along with trying to provide lower or free cost textbooks. We have food pantries and emergency financial loans and things like that. I do think that getting students through the courses with minimal cost is part of our mission. Do you want to talk about, is there some research to back up what they do? If they can save money, they reinvest that by taking additional classes.

Steve: We have some resources to point to.

Nathan: They showed at Tidewater, some of the research at Tidewater suggested that students actually enroll in higher numbers of credits in the semester where they're enrolled in an OER course.

Steve: It's increasing the chances they'll complete.

Nathan: Yeah. Ultimately we should make the case that that actually returns revenue to the college.

Deepak: That's what a lot of administrators are thinking when they hear this.

Steve: Right. I think I mentioned this yesterday in our meeting, but the fear of some of the chief financial officers, and it was at our institution as well, is, "Well, what if we get too big in this whole OER thing, in this whole Z-Degree thing? That's going to lessen our commission coming from the bookstore." I argued something that Nathan was just talking about, which is I think it has the potential to bring back more revenue, and think about the potential it has to aid completion.

With completion comes what we call success points, and there's incentives from the state for funding for success points.

Nathan: In Texas we get funded by ...

Steve: Some of our budget is funded by what's called success points and there's varying levels of achievement. The more those students achieve, you can see how this whole chain works. The more OER courses or the more courses they're able to take, the faster they can move towards completion, and the faster they move towards achieving these different levels of success, and therefore it translates into more funding from the state, on the state reimbursement [crosstalk 00:22:18].

Deepak: Good for you guys. I love a well-made case. That's awesome. That's fantastic. How was that rec-

Steve: Just don't break a link in that chain.

Deepak: How was it received?

Steve: Very well. It was an ongoing discussion, if you want to call it that, between me and the CFO at the time to say, "No. We should really support this." She understood, and she goes, "Yeah, that's a good thing. It's a good thing. [crosstalk 00:22:37]."

Deepak: I think one of the things as I'm going through and talking to folks, I'm definitely curious about how people made the case and how we persuaded. That's really great advice, I think, for other institutions.

Steve: Going back to what we were talking about before, the case was, well the catalyst, one of the major catalysts was the students coming to the administration and to the board, and just saying, "We're spending too much money on textbooks, and we have to do something about it as an institution." Especially as a large, diverse, and an institution that's attended by so many low income students as ours.

Nathan: To come back to some of the detractors of running a Z-Degree.

Deepak: Yeah. Go ahead, please.

Nathan: For instance, once you commit to a degree plan, you have to get every course in that degree plan. In some cases you might run into a case where you just don't have any faculty from that program who are willing to go into the OER. You really have to work with the faculty.

Deepak: That's the sales and the training functions together.

Nathan: You got to have carrots. This is another thing, we have a grant or stipend program, and try to sweeten the deal.

Deepak: Could you guys talk a little bit of how that's structured, like what design did you guys go with?

Nathan: We offer a small stipend, a \$300 stipend for completing a training certification, so getting through the training you get \$300. If you are in the Z-Degree program and you are newly adopting an OER, and you're just adopting an off-the-shelf textbook, you get \$300 for that. If you go through a course certification process, so this is a fairly rigorous review process that our center for teaching and learning excellence does.

They follow quality matters rubrics and there's a back and forth. If you get your course certified as an OER-certified course, that's \$600. Then if you are adapting or updating, or creating new content, you can submit an application for a grant, and in that application process you have to estimate the amount of hours that you'll be working on that project. Based on the hours that you estimate, you get either a 600, 1,200, or 1,800 stipend basically.

Deepak: Typically how long do those projects last?

Nathan: A semester.

Amy: We have a pretty robust professional development and center for teaching and learning. It's pretty strong. Basically we use the existing structures, and that's kind of what we did with everything. At every point, we were like, "Where do we have existing structures that we can use and just refocus towards this project?"

Nathan: Yeah. Make OER a normal business practice at the college.

Amy: Right. Since we already had that framework, it was pretty easy to just say, "These are the levels for OER." Nathan's really partnered with the leadership of CTLE. Also, we had leadership who supported professional development, and really put a lot of money behind it for each faculty member. We had that history, but in the past three years there was a huge increase in commitment to our locally developed and accessible professional development ...

Nathan: It's been good.

Amy: ... in-house.

Nathan: The only other drawback is that sometimes there isn't content out there. We did a business administration degree plan which requires an accounting sequence, accounting one and two. There hasn't been an OER in accounting. There will be one coming out in the spring from OpenStax, which everybody is waiting for.

Deepak: Fingers crossed.

Nathan: We've been offering accounting courses. What we did was we made a deal with the publisher, and basically we were able to get a couple of free access codes to digital content. It's not OER at all. It just happens to be free and we were able to make that deal and make it work.

Amy: To complicate that, the publisher had been working with our faculty. Our faculty were the co-authors, and it wasn't just the book, but it was also all of that supporting material. It was topnotch. Their success rate was in the 80s. We couldn't argue with them. Why should you change to an OER? Why should you redevelop everything that you've already developed with this publisher? That discussion we were stymied.

Nathan: It was tough.

Steve: They were co-developers, as you mentioned, of the materials, and it also had a lot of very rich supplementary materials, very good quiz banks, adaptive learning, all sorts of other media-related materials to it. It was really, really quite good. It was very, very hard at an OER level to compete with that, until something really comes along that's going to have those same kinds of materials that complement it, that match it.

I wanted to say one other thing. I want to put on my administrative hat for just a minute too.

Deepak: Yeah. Please do. Go for it.

Steve: This is something I said in one of Nathan's sessions today at the OpenEd Conference. I think it's really important for any institution that's trying to seriously get into this to, number one, have a full-time OER coordinator. We talked about that, the importance of it. I think also to come from the ranks of faculty. The other thing I was going to mention is that do the very best they possibly can to put OER into the strategic plan of the institution.

If OER is in the strategic plan, it becomes essentially part of the fabric, whether it's a three year or four year, however long it is. It essentially becomes part of the fabric of the institution, and it justifies it and it verifies it, and it codifies it, and it also funds it, which is one of the best benefits of it. If it's in the plan, at least at our institution and I know many other colleges and institutions, if it's in the plan it's going to get a chunk of money to be able to support it and see that it ends up succeeding.

I would urge any institution that does that to try to make it an official practice, an official activity and do that by becoming part of the plan, part of the strategic plan.

Deepak: As we're wrapping up here, I did want to ask are there any other lessons learned. I think one thing I'll do is in the show notes, can I post your article ...

Nathan: You bet.

Deepak: ... Nathan, there? There is a writeup, I think, of this case study that Nathan did, really nice, and got to details we couldn't cover today. Just at a high level, any other big takeaways if you're talking to colleagues at another campus? Steve, I'm glad you ended on those points about the OER coordinator and strategic plan. Any other lessons learned if you're maybe where you guys were a couple of years ago, you're thinking about doing this, and what are things you should think about?

Nathan: We said plan and then be flexible.

Amy: Yes. That's right.

Deepak: I like that.

Steve: Be ready to be thrown some curve balls.

Amy: That's right.

Nathan: Make sure you plan all the details and then be ready to scrap them.

Amy: That's right.

Steve: Particularly, and I know what Nathan's referring to, the plan for the Z-Degree and we thought we were going to have students coming to us like lemmings to the sea, as they say, but it didn't turn out to be the case, because we really mistook the number of available students who would really fit the profile that we were working towards. Flexibility I think is a really, really, really good thing.

Flexibility in all sorts of areas, not just planning the degree, but working with faculty, working with faculty adoption, working with the administration, working with the budgeting office, working with IT. That's why it's essential to have this cross representation on your steering committee, so everybody knows what's going on.

Deepak: I was going to say I think the steering committee is another structural thing that ...

Steve: It's another big-

Nathan: It's a big thing.

Amy: Huge.

Deepak: ... seems to have worked out really well for you guys.

Nathan: Helpful. Then collaborate with other institutions. We've been able to be a part of the OpenStax Institutional Partnership, which was a big, really helpful process to go through. We've been active in the CCC OER, we've mentioned, and the OpenEd Conference. I think the more you get engaged in the community, the more you get support, and you learn what's out there. That's really helpful.

Deepak: Well, Amy, Nathan, Steve, thank you guys so much.

Nathan: Thank you.

Steve: Thank you.

Amy: Thank you.

Deepak: Appreciate it.

Steve: It's been a great discussion, a fun opportunity.

Deepak: Great story. I'm glad we got to capture it.

Steve: Thanks Deep.

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