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Using OER in Tenure Narratives: Conversations with Tenure Experts

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Front Matter

1. Institution:

University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), Doctoral Universities: High Research Activity

2. Case study writer(s) name(s) and professional title(s):

Craig Finlay, Open Educational Resources and STEM Librarian

Isabel Soto Luna, Business Librarian

3. Type of intervention:

We conducted 16 interviews with unit heads at UNO who have experience with mentoring and reviewing tenure-track faculty and, from these interviews, articulated a number of strategies for using OERs work in tenure packets.

Background

University of Nebraska Omaha (UNO) is a metropolitan university with an enrollment of around 15,500. There are more than 200 programs of study spread across six colleges.

Guidelines for tenure and promotion are described by the colleges themselves. According to the current bylaws of the Board of Regents for the University of Nebraska System, “Each major administrative unit of the University shall prepare written standards which shall be used in making all decisions on promotions, awarding continuous appointments and merit salary adjustments. The standards may be applicable to the entire major administrative unit, or to appropriate subdivisions (such as colleges, schools, and departments) of a major administrative unit.”¹

In 2019, the University of Nebraska system launched the Open Nebraska (ONE) Initiative, promoting the adoption of no-cost and low-cost materials and tagging courses as such in the online catalog. As of the end of the spring 2023 semester, this initiative has had a total estimated financial impact of over \$16 million, with UNO accounting for nearly \$5 million of that. Over 100 UNO courses have received internal grants to transition into being ONE-tagable. These include the UNO Criss Library’s Affordable Content Grant (ACG) and, formerly, the

¹ University of Nebraska at Omaha. (1990). “University guidelines on reappointment, promotion and tenure recommendations.” Retrieved May 2, 2023.

https://www.unomaha.edu/academic-affairs/_files/documents/policies/rpt-guidelines.pdf

Office of Digital Learning Online Course Development Grants. The OER component of the latter grants has been folded into the library program. The heavy majority of the Affordable Content Grants have been for fully OER course conversions.

Examples of recent large-scale, grant-funded projects include all sections of Fundamentals of Public Speaking and Composition II, each offering over 100 sections a year, and all sections of Introduction to Astronomy, the highest enrolled general education STEM course. Craig Finlay oversees the library grant program, in addition to working on the ONE tagging project and working with online learning, and the Office of General Education and Dual Enrollment to strategically target high-enrollment courses for conversions. Isabel Soto Luna works with Craig Finlay on Creative Commons and OER workshop programming through the Office of Digital Learning. Soto Luna also serves on the Affordable Content Grants committee.

A recent innovative achievement was the development of a ONE-tagged degree pathway for the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. This was overseen by Dr. Dan Hawkins, the director of online learning, and funded by the office of Dr. Jaci Lindburg, associate vice chancellor for Innovative and Learning-Centric Initiatives.

Approach

Given UNO's broad engagement with OER, we proposed that the university would serve as a good site to conduct a survey of departments regarding if and how OER work affects the tenure process, with an initial intended focus on language used in guidelines. We interviewed 16 UNO faculty with experience in mentoring and reviewing tenure applicants. It quickly became apparent that none of the guidelines so much as mentioned OER (with the exception of the library). As such, we switched our focus to examples of, and recommendations for, faculty using OER in their RPT process, offering our insight and an insider's guide to using OER work in telling a faculty member's story, documenting impact, and making the case for tenure.

Results

From these interviews, we describe five major considerations for using OER work in tenure packets:

- I. Classifying OER work in a tenure portfolio: teaching, research, or service?

- II. OER work as teaching: making the case for excellence in curriculum and teaching developments.
- III. Using assessment as research for writing pedagogical research articles, thereby strengthening one's case for excellence in research and creative activity.
- IV. Getting credit for the amount of work required to adapt/create new OER.
- V. Getting a sense of departmental attitudes toward OER.

Due to space constraints, we will be focusing on the first three and making the last two available online as an appendix.

Fortunately, the fact that departmental and unit RPT guidelines did not mention OER directly did not mean the units had not considered the value of OER work. Consistently, interviewees were familiar with OER, supportive of their use, and most had seen OER work used in successful packets. No one indicated a departmental culture that looked down upon OER.

We interviewed 16 faculty and administrators from the College of Arts and Sciences, the College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences, the College of Business Administration, the Dr. C. C. and Mabel L. Criss Library, and the Division of Innovative and Learning-Centric Initiatives, seeking advice for classifying OER work and making one's case in their RPT narrative. As a practical skill, the tenure packet is essential to faculty existence, yet how often can faculty say they learned how to write one before filling out their first? The resulting article provides valuable insight from experienced professionals on this sometimes-daunting process.

I. Classifying OER Work in a Tenure Portfolio: Teaching, Research, or Service?

While the specifics of departmental and college tenure and promotion guidelines vary, what is universal is the division of faculty work into three standard categories: research/creative activity, teaching, and service. Most commonly, faculty must make a case for an assessment of excellence in at least the areas of research/creative activity and teaching, with the most weight given to research^{2,3}. Because a given achievement should not generally be listed in both areas, the first decision a faculty member must make is how to categorize their OER work. All 16 interviewees

² Schimanski, L. A., & Alperin J. P. The evaluation of scholarship in academic promotion and tenure processes: Past, present, and future. *F1000Res*. October 5, 2018, 7:1605.

³ Youn, T. I., & Price, T. M. (2009). Learning from the experience of others: The evolution of faculty tenure and promotion rules in comprehensive institutions. *Journal of Higher Education*, 80(2), 204–237.

responded that they believed OER work belonged in instruction, and nine had seen successful cases of faculty doing so. While we will discuss OER as instruction in the first two strategies, in section 3, we will describe strategies for using OER to also strengthen the research and creative activity area of your packet.

Dr. Christina Dando is the chair of the Department of Geography and Geology at UNO. Her faculty have the distinction of having received more Affordable Content Grants, eight in all, than any other department and all for full no-cost OER conversions. For Dando, OER work is an ideal chance to make the case for teaching excellence because OER adoptions necessitate what is effectively a course redesign. The chance to reexamine learning outcomes and objectives, week-by-week schedules, and the change in pedagogy of switching to online materials all count as curriculum development, a cornerstone of the teaching category.

“It’s not enough to simply teach the class, and you can’t go up [for tenure and promotion] on student evaluations alone,” Dando said. “You need to demonstrate innovation and development.”

This was a key takeaway, and one that every interviewee noted. Student evaluations and the number of classes taught are not by themselves sufficient to establish excellence in teaching. Tenure committees look for curriculum development, and to make that case, faculty need to demonstrate innovation, assessment, and responsive course design. Dr. Danielle Battisti, chair of the Department of History, seconded the potential of an OER conversion to address multiple categories of curriculum development, including new course development, course redesigns and updates, and creation of new materials and online conversions.

“Some of us have been teaching the same class over and over again, and maybe it’s been years since someone really tinkered with their syllabus, and it’s time for redevelopment, either in materials or to integrate more online instruction,” Battisti said. “And we’re very aware of the push for OER, and many of us have already been moving in that way organically, as more and more materials become available.”

Both the Department of Geography and Department of History adhere to the College of Arts and Sciences RPT guidelines, which require evidence for the following:

[Distinguished](#) performance in teaching or research/creative activity.

[Proficient](#) (or higher) performance in the other area—that is, teaching or research/creative activity.

[Competent](#) (or higher) performance in service.

For the service category, faculty usually rely on committee work, whether to the institution in the form of doing a two-year stint on the university parking committee or to the profession, in the form of professional association committee work.⁴ For OER work, a faculty member might look to serve on a committee that is already doing OER work, or they may introduce an OER initiative at a professional, departmental, or university level. An example of how non-OER-specific committees can undertake such work is a 2021 UNO Faculty Senate resolution, prepared by the Committee on Educational Resources and Services, affirming support for OER and the adoption of a university-wide tagging system for the online course catalog,⁵ which allows students to search specifically for low- and no-cost courses when registering. For teaching and creative activity, however, a faculty member may be torn if they devoted a great deal of labor to the creation of new materials, even writing a new textbook. Having done so, they want rightful credit for their work, and research/creative activity seems the logical place to do that.

The problem arises in the fact that much of the OER ecosystem has arisen outside of the realm of standard publishing networks. And even those created through conventional publishers often don't meet departmental standards for what constitutes research: a guiding research question, a methodology, and a peer-reviewed publication.

“Our department is pretty black and white in that research has to have a hypothetical question that's being researched or answered,” said Dr. Jodi Kreiling, chair of chemistry at UNO, when asked where new materials creation would likely fit. “So for us, it would still go under teaching because it would be curriculum development.”

II. OER Work as Teaching: Making the Case for Excellence in Curriculum and Teaching Development

Just as simply listing the number of courses taught and years taught is insufficient for an excellent assessment in teaching, so is simply listing OER adoption. While OER provides a great opportunity to make the case for development, assessment, and innovation, one cannot simply

⁴ Lee, D. (2007). On the tenure track: Strategies for success. *College & Research Libraries News*, 68(10), 626–661.

⁵ University of Nebraska at Omaha. (2021). “2020–2021 Faculty Senate Minutes, Wednesday, April 14, 2021.”

Retrieved April 13, 2023.

<https://www.unomaha.edu/faculty-senate/faculty-senate/2020-2021-fs-minutes/2021-04-fs-minutes.pdf>

assume that reviewers will know the amount of work that goes into the adoption of open resources. Each of these must be described in turn. The complexity of assessing teaching often makes this narrative more challenging than the research narrative, as multiple interviewees noted. While research can be more neatly described in terms of peer-reviewed publications, faculty are unlikely to have such a simple descriptive tool for teaching. At UNO, faculty can apply for course development grants through the Office of Digital Learning, which pairs faculty with instructional designers to work on accessibility, engagement, and learning outcomes, among other things. It is likely that most unit heads at UNO would be familiar with this program, but even so, the case for development, assessment, and innovation must be made textually, in the narrative.

Dr. John Erickson, chair of management for the College of Business Administration, summed up the challenge reviewers often face: “On the teaching side, things are always a little more difficult to judge because you have to look at the quality of teaching, the engagement with the students. New course development, assessment. And then there’s still a variety of other things that you can use to judge people’s teaching.” Erickson said, “It’s never as simple as it is with research.”

Whereas a research narrative can simply describe an overall research area and list journal article publications, presentations, and scholarly manuscripts, a teaching case needs to make an *argument*. And while the adoption of OERs will necessarily require a substantial amount of attention to deliverables and teaching modalities, OER work also offers the potential for further assessment and demonstration of a thoughtful, progressive approach to teaching excellence and student success.

Dr. Chris Moore, chair of the Department of Physics, advises writing a narrative in a way that describes teaching as an ongoing process rather than something to be counted in terms of the number of students and courses taught. Toward this end, Moore advises faculty to think of their teaching narratives in the same way they do their research narratives.

“We’re trained in grad school to write publications, journal articles and grant proposals, and we’re always thinking, ‘what’s next,’ and ‘how is this going to lead to that,’ and that bit of self-reflection on the research side,” Moore said. “You see, [research] narratives that have that built in, but then on the teaching side you don’t necessarily see the same thing.”

To make the teaching narrative a story of progress, faculty should undertake continual

assessments along the way. An OER implementation should not be a one-and-done project but rather a process of continual improvement. The most common method, after calculating simple monetary impact, is to track drop-fail-withdrawal rates and student GPA. While several studies—including Clinton and Khan (2019),⁶ Colvard, Watson, and Park (2018),⁷ and Pelton et al. (2023)⁸—have found that OER adoption improved student performance in these metrics, many other studies have found no significant difference. Grimaldi et al. (2019) postulate that the high number of null results stems from the access-hypothesis of student success, which does not apply to many students whose performance will be included in these metrics.⁹ Barring the happy result of a positive student success correlation then, what else can faculty use in terms of assessment? Here, Moore stresses the value of qualitative data: “For example, if you’re going to implement OpenStax Astronomy, you’d want to just ask your students what they thought about that. What do they think about the materials you’re using, how it can be done better.” Moore said, “Has it made the course more accessible to them? Did it factor into their decision-making process for enrolling in the course? These are all things you can ask students on simple Google form, make it anonymous, and you can get some good responses.”

Moore added that the key to this approach is freely admitting what did not work, in addition to what did. If a faculty member is assessing the impact of OER adoption along the way, including both quantitative and qualitative student feedback, then that assessment enables faculty to adjust and better those outcomes. This demonstrates the growth mindset that committees are looking for in a teaching narrative.

A final aspect of the teaching narrative to remember is that the faculty member is using their narrative *to tell a story*. Here, the “narrative” portion is important. While the variety of

⁶ Clinton, V., & Khan, S. (2019). Efficacy of Open Textbook Adoption on Learning Performance and Course Withdrawal Rates: A Meta-Analysis. *AERA Open*, 5(3), 2332858419872212.

⁷ Colvard, N. B., Watson, C. E., & Park, H. (2018). The Impact of open educational resources on various student success metrics. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 30(2), 262–276.

⁸ Pelton, J., Carlson, K., Finlay, C., Glenn, E., Hawkins, D., & Lindburg, J. (2023). *Student success in open Nebraska courses* [white paper]. University of Nebraska at Omaha Division of Innovative and Learning Centric Initiatives.

⁹ Grimaldi, P. J., Basu Mallick, D, Waters, A. E., & Baraniuk, R. G. (2019). Do open educational resources improve student learning? Implications of the access hypothesis. *PLoS ONE*, 14(3): e0212508. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0212508>

work a faculty member does during their tenure process is unlikely to all fall under the same umbrella area of focus, the narrative is a faculty member's chance to make the case for diverse accomplishments at least living in the orbit of one or two gravitational forces. As with research projects taking a researcher to unexpected places, teaching journeys are rarely as clean as "I set out to do X, and X is what I did." Unexpected opportunities and partnerships can arise, and new unit-specific or university-wide initiatives can give faculty the chance for service and recognition. Even so, a narrative can describe work in such a way as to give the impression of a more unified approach than is imparted by a simple list of accomplishments.

Dr. Dando stressed that this is one of the most important considerations when looking at the tenure narrative *as a craft*. "Writing your narrative is your chance to tell your story, and it's important that the story be coherent. Not everything someone has done will have been according to a single guiding strategy, but the narrative where they can describe these projects in consistent terms," Dando said. "So you can say, 'my work with OER was student centered; my curriculum development was student centered.'"

Fortunately, as OER adaption and adoption can be described as contributing to the areas of development, innovation, and assessment, OER work can also slot into any number of larger university or unit focuses and initiatives. For example, if a university strategic plan specifically mentions equity and access, OER work falls within that area. The same is true for initiatives to support online learning, improve student success, or innovate emergent pedagogical modalities.

III. Using OER Work to Strengthen Your Research and Creative Activity Case

The idea of listing OER work within the teaching while research and creative activity are often weighted more heavily may strike some as disappointing. It does not need to be the case, however, that OER work neglects the research and creative activity case of a tenure packet. If a faculty member is undertaking regular assessment in their OER work to demonstrate continual improvement in teaching, they are also, in doing so, undertaking data collection for research in scholarship of teaching and learning. As an interdisciplinary field, scholarship of teaching and learning journals are open to articles looking at learning and innovation in any subject area.

Dr. Kreiling, UNO chemistry chair, specifically referenced Allen et al. (2014), which evaluated the effectiveness of ChemWiki compared to standard chemistry textbooks. Multiple

interviewees noted the possibility of OER adoptions to serve as the basis of pedagogical research, thereby allowing faculty to effectively use some of their labor twice. While it is unlikely that scholarship in teaching and learning publications alone will satisfy unit research requirements, they can certainly strengthen one's case, diversifying their contributions to scholarly literature.

Dr. Moore, UNO physics chair, is also a discipline-based educational researcher. His 2017 book, *Creating Scientists: Teaching and Assessing Science Practice for the NGSS*, looks at deployable tools to undertake continual development of science education according to Next Generation Science Standards. As such, Moore notes that he has a different research focus than most of his faculty and is familiar with the challenge of splitting often overlapping work into the different baskets of research/creative activity and teaching.

“You have to make a decision as a faculty member how you're going to sell that: Is it research, or is it teaching?” Moore said. “That was a challenge I had to go through—I had to use that pedagogy development, the efficacy studies of different things that we were doing as my research. So how do you make the distinction between the two?”

For Moore, undertaking assessment from the beginning contributed to both categories, and by continually tracking student performance, he had numbers to support his tenure case alongside the research credit for his pedagogical scholarship. It's something he says he's integrated into his tenure mentorship of new physics faculty by sending them to teaching assessment workshops.

“When they come back, part of the process is just talking about the things they've learned, what they've implemented, and how to show in a simple way that it's having an impact on students,” Moore said.

This kind of assessment enables OER adopters to, alongside the establishment of a research question and following a research design, package their OER work-as-scholarship of teaching and learning publication. Faculty can and should think of their OER work and the research that comes out of it as different deliverables of the same project. Not doing so deprives them of higher-level outcomes for research and creative activity while also depriving their teaching narratives of hard data needed to demonstrate innovation, development, and assessment.

Julie Pelton, another pedagogical researcher, is chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at UNO. That department recently completed the creation of an affordable content

degree pathway, the first in the University of Nebraska system. That project, funded by the UNO Division of Innovative and Learning-Centric Initiatives, used incentive grants for faculty who converted identified courses needed to create the degree pathway. Pelton advises that faculty who are doing OER-based curriculum development keep in mind that there are a variety of outcomes that can come from the same project.

“In our RPT process, creating a new class that didn’t exist before or creating a new minor is probably the highest end for teaching,” Pelton said. “Adopting or using a service learning or applied project comes next, and working on a department-wide grant courses, those count more than [simple OER adoption]. And in the grand scheme of things of things that land, that could be a research article on OER, which would be the pinnacle of how OER could count for your promotion and tenure.”

Beyond peer-reviewed research, Pelton advises faculty to look for conference opportunities and other venues for describing their work. Essential in all cases, though, is collecting assessment data along the way, as this allows for publications while also strengthening a faculty member’s case for curriculum development in their teaching narrative.

Undertaking a dual approach of assessment, continual development, and pedagogical research allows faculty to use their OER work in both their teaching narratives and for research and creative activity. That OER adoption is ideally suited to allow for demonstrated excellence in teaching makes such an argument an essential component of narratives by faculty who have done so. And that this same work can easily result in peer-reviewed publications, provided faculty are undertaking attentive assessment, makes OERs a rare two-for-one tenure packet component. Soon, instead of simply discussing how OER might be successfully used in tenure packets, we should consider OER advocacy, which argues that it is in a faculty member’s self-interest to do so specifically *because* it can be such a powerful tool in the tenure process.

Recommendations

1. List OER work under teaching in tenure packets. When undertaken alongside regular assessment, this indicates the key aspects of excellent teaching performance: innovation, development, and assessment.
2. Investigate professional development opportunities in the form of teaching assessment.
3. Undertake regular mixed-methods assessment of courses in which OER has been implemented, looking at both performance metrics such as drop-fail-withdrawal (DFW) rates and overall grade distribution and at student feedback. Don’t be afraid to admit when

something didn't work. This will solidify a teaching case as excellent by demonstrating innovation, development, and assessment.

4. Use the data collected from assessment to publish articles on scholarship of teaching and learning. Since the data has been collected anyway, it can easily be used for scholarship as well. This will add peer-reviewed scholarship to the tenure packet, even if it isn't in the faculty member's usual area. Some places to start when considering publication outlets include the following:
 - *Innovative Higher Education*. Springer, founded in 1976.
 - *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*. Taylor & Francis, founded in 2004.
 - *International Journal of Science Education*. Taylor & Francis, founded in 1979.
 - *Journal of College Science Teaching*. National Science Teaching Association, founded in 1971.
 - *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning*. Emerald Publishing, founded in 2008.
 - *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. Indiana University Faculty Academy on Excellence in Teaching, founded in 2001.
 - *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning*. Taylor & Francis, founded in 1986.
 - *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*. Duke University Press, founded in 2001.

