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Shaping the Futures of Learning in the Digital Age

Inclusive Access for All

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Abstract: Inclusive Access provides a framework for digital course material delivered via the learning management system (LMS) day-one to students. This platform assists instructors with selecting current, quality, affordable material, and supports learning analytics by providing engagement data in Canvas. The University of Nebraska Provost office has funded an initial series of grants to support open educational resources (OER) initiatives at the Lincoln, Kearney, and Omaha campuses for several years. The vast majority of these dollars went to incentivize faculty in the adoption of OER. The OER and Inclusive Access pilots are ready to mature into a service supported by Academic Technologies in ITS at the University of Nebraska. As the launch of the 2019-20 academic year, the services that began as pilots were ready for prime time, which was critical for scaling these services during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the Fall 2020 semester completes in a hybrid, de-densified environment, we have even more data to show the successful adoption of OER and Inclusive Access platform made a difference for both our students and instructors as courses moved online. Initially there was excitement about using inclusive access platforms to help save students money and provide content the first day of the semester. Now our faculty across the NU system are using OER in innovative ways to connect with their students. The Academic Technologies teams at the University of Nebraska will continue to gather feedback from the faculty and students we support, tweaking the services as need be. The initiatives have been successful, and we look forward to hearing from more faculty members who report: “it just works!”

Keywords: *Inclusive Access, Affordability Initiative, OER, Academic Technologies*

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Inclusive Access for All

Sometimes the best way forward is with a pilot program, and Open Educational Resources (OER) and Inclusive Access digital course materials efforts at the University of Nebraska (NU) are a classic example. The past few years have been marked with tremendous evolution and change at Nebraska. A long-time Blackboard user since 1998, the University system—with four campuses at Kearney, Omaha, Lincoln, and the Medical Center - made the decision to migrate to Canvas in 2017. Along with this learning management system (LMS) transition, Information Technology Services (ITS) divisions across three campuses and Central Administration aligned into a single Office of Information Technology Services (ITS) for the NU system. The reorganization created five shared services divisions that scale well – including Security and Infrastructure—and also established a Community of Practice (CoP) for the Academic Technologies (AT) teams. A goal of the restructure was to find a healthy 80/20 split of service where the majority of core systems for teaching and learning (such as the LMS, collaborative technologies, and video capture/caption services) are the same across the NU system while also being flexible in order to align to needs of an individual campus as needed. This balance is aimed at providing enhanced support of teaching and learning, scaling services where possible, and uncovering new avenues for partnership across a common platform. Finally, the university is in a similar situation to many higher education institutions in seeking to identify affordability initiatives to provide a more cost-efficient education for our students. These multiplying factors: a holistic IT reorganization, realized efficiencies of services, and the launch of affordability initiatives have been a blessing in disguise, allowing our AT teams to rethink how we support teaching and learning at Nebraska and try new ways to scale services.

In 2015, the University of Nebraska Provost provided the first grant funding for Open Education Resources (OER) at the University. This was seed funding for faculty to redesign their courses incorporating OER material. Since then, each campus has funded and supported OER in two-year cycles. The Kearney campus was the first campus to provide grant funding to faculty in academic years 2015/16 and 2016/17. The Lincoln campus participated in 2017/18 and 2018/19 and the Omaha campus in 2019/20 and 2020/21. The staggered approach has allowed the Academic Technologies teams to support and learn from each grant cycle. It also provides growth opportunities as technology matures and communication on OER gains momentum across the NU system.

This initial program was very successful, as it laid the foundation for digital-born content in courses using Canvas and provided a collaborative partnership between faculty and their campus AT teams, librarians, and instructional designers. The Provost's grant project also spurred discussion on how to provide digital content to students in a more affordable manner. For the first time, NU was now working together in asking the question: why are our students buying expensive textbooks if we can provide quality OER content for free? This challenged the Academic Technologies teams to look for other opportunities to deliver affordable course content. The University of Nebraska became a member of Unizin in 2017, a consortium of 25 higher education institutions that focuses on learner success, access, and affordability. Our membership provides

new opportunities to learn from peers and influence academic technology services. It also allows NU to utilize the Engage platform for inclusive access to course material via the Canvas LMS.

Inclusive access is a new course material model providing affordable course content to students day-one via the LMS. As is the case with institutions across the country, more and more NU students are waiting to buy books weeks into the semester, if at all, due to the skyrocketing cost of textbooks. Providing day-one access is a key element of this program, as it creates a more equitable learning environment for all students in a course. Now that the University of Nebraska uses Canvas, we can scale inclusive access across the system, working closely with key campus partners including ITS, Registrar's Office, Bursar's Office, Campus Bookstores, University Libraries, textbook publishers, students and faculty. Inclusive access content is more affordable for students and is billed directly to their student account, which allows them to utilize financial aid and/or scholarships to pay for inclusive access material. Students also retain the right to participate in inclusive access course material or not (via opt-out options).

The Lincoln campus has piloted two inclusive access platforms. The first inclusive access option is provided by Unizin through the Engage tool and accessed via Canvas. Instructors select their course materials, which are available day-one or even prior to the official start of a term for student use and instructor review. We are learning as we go through the pilot, which is currently a manual process. This allows the Academic Technologies team to discuss the service with instructors in real time and involves learning more about the publishing industry. In the long-term, inclusive access will be automated until then (Spring 2021) we are setting a solid foundation for the service. Student analytics are available for instructors using select Engage material in their Canvas course. This provides data on what students are viewing/reading (or not) and annotations can be shared with the class. Print material is still requested for many classes. Students can print up to 50 pages at a time for all publisher titles in the Engage platform. The second inclusive access option is provided by the Follett University Bookstore through the Follett Access (formerly IncludEd) tool in Canvas. While this inclusive access platform started as a manual process, it is now automated for faculty to select material for their course. Course materials are automatically assigned to the course on day one or before for student use and instructor review. Print options are available for students as determined by the publisher. We purposely decided to pilot both options, as many instructors have established relationships with the campus bookstore and not all the course materials are available in Engage. Our campus is already impressed by the benefits of inclusive access provided by both options, including: 1) saving students money; 2) no decreases in student success*; 3) easy adoption processes for faculty; 4) delivering material from top publishers in Canvas; and 5) no need for student access codes.

The impact of inclusive access at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln is significant, especially when comparing the pilot program to current semester data. The Fall 2019 pilot included approximately 60 courses impacting 5,405 students for an estimated savings of \$379,819 in book costs. The breakdown from the two inclusive access platforms: the Engage (Unizin) pilot supported 23 classes of 3,116 students for an estimated savings of \$242,511 in book costs. The Follett Access pilot supported 37 classes of 1,929 students for an estimated savings of \$137,307 in book costs. The Fall 2020 semester included approximately 199 courses impacting 14,352 students for an estimated savings of \$849,485 in book costs. The breakdown from the two inclusive access platforms: the Engage (Unizin) pilot supported 28 classes of 3,808 students for an estimated savings of \$205,143 in book costs. The Follett Access program supported 171 classes of 10,544 students for an estimated savings of \$644,342 in book costs. To scale out the impact of inclusive access since we started the pilot program, the book cost savings for students on the Lincoln campus

is an estimated \$1,861,530. This includes approximately 390 classes with over 29,600 students over the course of two academic years.

The University of Nebraska-Omaha (UNO) campus also participated in the OER initiative via the Provost's seed grants. During the Spring 2019 semester, the Academic Technologies team worked closely with campus partners in Criss Library to provide the first round of Provost-funded grants to faculty members. In Spring and Summer of 2019, seven courses adopted OER as part of this grant funding program. In 2019-20, two types of OER grants were made available at the Omaha campus: the same OER grants as prior year, in addition to an additional stipend being added to online course development grants that also adopt OER as part of course conversion coordinated by the Office of Online Learning. By doubling down on incentivization options to recognize faculty's time and effort in adopting OER, the campus was able to fund 47 additional courses in converting to OER during the 2019-20 academic year. Then, as the campus kicked off the Fall 2020 semester, 35 grants were awarded for OER that term. While many of these grant recipients are still completing their adoption and course redevelopment work at the time of this article's publication, savings created for students due to OER for the Omaha campus are already tracking at above \$400,000.

In Spring 2019, a closer relationship was formed with the campus bookstore to advance the affordable course content effort even further. The campus bookstore had just begun their own effort coordinating an inclusive access day-one digital course textbook option. Through partnership with academic technologies and integration with Canvas, this quickly became a popular option for faculty and students on the Omaha campus, saving students over \$1M over the cost of traditional textbooks in just a single 2019 calendar year. By coordinating a single marketing approach to faculty members encouraging them to understand the options available to them during the course material adoption process – including OER and inclusive access – the impact of their choices on a student's overall cost of attendance, we have been able to save students nearly \$1.5M. Another critical element of this project on the Omaha campus was the creation of an OER Coordinator position, a dual report to the library and Academic Technologies units. This individual serves as the primary point of contact for faculty questions in seeking to identify quality OER readily available for course implementation.

The University of Nebraska-Omaha offers two nationally recognized online degree programs. Students at the Omaha campus interact regularly through online coursework, with 25% of UNO's total credit hours coming from online courses, and over 95% of students experiencing at least one online class before they graduate. Support from campus leadership for this initiative is strong, with continued support for staff positions and resources to advance this initiative in support of learners and the campus's commitment to its access mission as a metropolitan, community-engaged institution.

The beauty of a pilot is the opportunity to “kick the tires” for a service. As the University of Nebraska is a system member of Unizin, we can share progress reports with our peers. Conversation within the Unizin Accessibility subgroup has been beneficial, as there are two schools who have dealt with lawsuits due to accessibility issues with OER and/or inclusive access platforms. Due to these concerns, they are not adopting Engage after piloting due to extensive, unaddressed accessibility issues. For the Nebraska system, the Omaha campus is leading the review of accessibility issues with inclusive access platforms. Being able to pilot a platform on one campus and review accessibility concerns from another allows us to scale services and efficiently support teaching and learning. The Omaha campus will pilot the Vital Source platform to compare accessibility concerns with the Engage inclusive access platform.

The Provost's Office grants for OER and Inclusive Access pilots are ready to mature into a full, continuous service supported by Academic Technologies teams in NU ITS. The next step is scaling this as an ITS "Big Idea". The ITS Big Idea initiative was initially a process from the University of Nebraska Provost, in which faculty participated in helping to plan for University-wide strategic funding priorities. ITS launched its own Big Idea process in 2019-20, seeking proposals from throughout our division bringing forward innovative ideas that are: 1) strategic; 2) impactful at the multiple campuses we serve and not just one environment; 3) forward-facing with a noticeable impact to faculty, students, and staff - one that is visible and clearly understood by our users; 4) not a product or system name, but focused on *why* we would do this work. The OER proposal, entitled "Inclusive Access for All" was selected from 43 proposals as a finalist for the ITS Big Idea initiative. We are excited to deliver enhanced services with inclusive access, and look forward to communicating how this impacts student success at Nebraska.

As we entered the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, we were fortunate, as the services that began as pilots were ready for prime time. There was already excitement about using inclusive access platforms to help save students money and provide content the first day of the semester. Our faculty across the NU system are using OER in innovative ways to connect with their students. As our campus leaders rapidly search for all possible avenues to engage, retain, and motivate students throughout the pandemic, OER has emerged yet again as an outstanding option for delivering value, efficiency, convenience, and a clear, positive impact to a student's cost of attendance. Toward the beginning of the pandemic, the NU ITS organization pursued additional external grant funding to aid in continuing our grant programs for faculty, and were recently awarded an additional \$84,000 from Women Investing in Nebraska, a philanthropic organization, of which the NU Provost's Office matched funds for a total of \$168,000 new dollars to align to faculty's continued adoption of OER and inclusive access options. As we enter the Spring 2021 semester, we are working closely with student governments and faculty senates to gain approval for the addition of course marking in the student information system, and a course scheduling tool to add visibility and transparency to students and their families. This functionality will allow individuals to search for which courses are using OER and inclusive access at the time in which they register for courses, rather than just before a course is scheduled to begin.

What started as a good faith effort from the NU Provost and the Kearney campus back in 2015 has become a bona fide strategy for the University of Nebraska and NU ITS, who are now tracking \$4.9M in total savings to students as a result of this initiative. As COVID-19 brought an inevitable digital transformation to campus communities, the OER and inclusive access programs were cast into the spotlight and the hard work in piloting, planning, and building an infrastructure to support this activity became apparent in delivering obvious value. Without a strong pilot in which to scale, these types of savings would not have been possible in the timeframe in which they were achieved if we needed to start from scratch. It would have also been difficult, if not impossible, to launch our OER and inclusive access pilots during the pandemic due to competing priorities and the staff time needed for more general instructional support as our NU campuses pivoted to remote learning. The Academic Technologies teams at the University of Nebraska will continue to gather feedback from the faculty and students we support, tweaking the services as need be. Oftentimes, the greatest feedback we receive is when we save a student money or a faculty member time. The impact has been highlighted by valued faculty members across our campuses, and we look forward to hearing from more faculty members who report: "it just works!"

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