SPARC

OER MYTHBUSTING

ADDRESSING COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

Since our original publication in 2017, the Open Educational Resources (OER) movement has grown significantly, becoming an established and expanding part of the higher education landscape. What began as an emerging innovation is now widely adopted across institutions, disciplines, and regions. Faculty awareness of OER has increased, research continues to affirm their positive impact on teaching and learning, and institutions have incorporated OER into broader strategies to improve access, affordability, and student success.

At their core, OER are teaching, learning, and research materials that are openly licensed, allowing educators to use, adapt, and share them to meet the needs of their students. This flexibility supports more accessible and adaptable learning environments while enabling institutions to invest in shared academic infrastructure.

Despite this progress, questions and misconceptions about OER persist. Some reflect outdated assumptions from the field's early development, while others relate to evolving technologies, accessibility expectations, and changing educational practices. This updated edition of *OER Mythbusting* addresses these questions directly, drawing on recent research, community experience, and current practice.

This document is intended as a resource for faculty, administrators, librarians, instructional designers, and others seeking to better understand how OER function in today's educational environment.

MYTH 1

Does “open” mean the same thing as free?

Fact: Open educational resources are not just free—they are openly licensed, which means educators and students have permission to use, adapt, and share them.

Many educational materials today come at high costs and carry restrictions on how or even if they can be retained and used. OER are different because they grant explicit legal permission for educators to revise, remix, and redistribute content.

This flexibility changes how educational materials function in practice. Instead of working around fixed, proprietary content, educators can tailor materials to reflect their course outcomes, their students’ backgrounds, and emerging developments in their field. Students, in turn, can keep and revisit their course materials without losing access after the term ends.

This ability to adapt and retain materials supports both academic freedom and lifelong learning. Openness is not simply about removing costs; it is about enabling participation in the creation and improvement of educational resources.

Research and Resources:

- UNESCO Definition of OER
- Creative Commons Licenses
- The 5R Permissions Framework

MYTH 2

Can OER be high-quality and academically rigorous?

Fact: Research shows that using open educational resources match or exceed traditional textbooks in quality and support similar or improved student learning outcomes.

Quality in educational materials depends on their ability to support teaching and learning, not their price. A growing body of research has examined the impact of OER adoption across institutions and disciplines. These studies consistently find that students using OER perform as well as, or in many cases better than, students using traditional textbooks, reinforcing that openly licensed materials effectively support academic success.

Today, many OER are authored by subject matter experts, developed through structured editorial processes, and evaluated through peer review systems. These processes help ensure OER meet disciplinary standards and maintain appropriate levels of academic rigor. In addition, platforms such as the Open Textbook Library allow instructors to evaluate materials based on clearly defined criteria, supporting informed selection and adoption. These reviews are openly available for anyone to access.

OER are also adaptable and can be revised and customized by instructors to align course content with learning objectives, disciplinary context and student needs. This flexibility supports intentional course design and provides a path for instructors to enhance materials to meet academic rigor standards while also supporting student-centered teaching and learning.

Research and Resources:

- Open Education Network: Open Textbook Library
- The Impact of Open Educational Resources on Student Achievement: A Meta-Analysis
- Open Educational Resources and College Textbook Choices: A Review of Research on Efficacy and Perceptions

MYTH 3

Can OER support accessibility and help institutions meet digital accessibility expectations?

Fact: Many open educational resources are designed with an accessibility-first mindset, and open licensing makes it easier for institutions to adapt materials to support all learners.

Accessibility is an essential part of teaching and learning. Institutions are responsible for ensuring that course materials are usable by students with disabilities and diverse needs, including those who rely on assistive technologies. OER can support this work by enabling institutions and instructors to adapt materials directly, add alternative text, improve formatting, and create alternative formats without requiring additional permissions.

Since OER can be legally modified, accessibility improvements can be made more quickly and sustainably. Open licenses provide a flexibility that allows institutions to respond to evolving accessibility standards and student needs, rather than relying solely on external vendors. The enhancements can then be shared freely, creating a more robust library of accessible materials.

Another myth is that commercial materials are guaranteed to be accessible for all students. That is false: accessibility is an ongoing process that impacts *all* educational resources—open or not. Openness is a strength that allows educational materials to be adapted, shared, and improved to better meet the needs of different learners and contexts.

Research and Resources:

- U.S. Department of Justice Title II Digital Accessibility Rule
- Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)
- BCcampus Accessibility Toolkit for OER

MYTH 4

Do OER options include supplementary teaching materials such as instructional ancillaries and courseware?

Fact: Open educational resources can include instructor resources such as slides, test banks, and LMS-ready materials with an expanding pool of additional teaching and learning assets.

Instructors often rely on supplemental teaching materials to support instruction, including lecture slides, assessments, and course integration tools. Over time, the OER ecosystem has evolved to support these needs.

For example, providers such as OpenStax offer aligned instructor resources like test banks, lecture slides, and learning management system (LMS) course cartridges alongside their textbooks. Open publishing platforms and initiatives support the creation, adaptation, and sharing of both core content and supplementary materials. This helps reduce duplication of effort and strengthens teaching practice across institutions. In addition, courseware options continue to grow, giving instructors more flexibility in how they design and deliver their courses.

In some cases, students are also engaged in creating or improving course materials through open educational practices. Assignments that involve revising, updating, or developing educational content can contribute to the broader ecosystem while deepening student learning and engagement.

As a result, OER not only provide access to core content, but also support a more flexible, collaborative, and continuously improving approach to teaching and learning.

Research and Resources:

- OER Commons Shared Teaching Materials
- LibreTexts Open Platform and Instructional Materials
- Instructor Resources for OpenStax Textbooks

MYTH 5

Are OER materials current, and can they be updated over time?

Fact: Many open educational resources are actively maintained and can be updated more easily than traditional textbooks.

Educational content must evolve to reflect new discoveries, current events, and changes in professional practice. Traditional textbooks follow fixed edition cycles, which can delay updates. In contrast, OER can be revised more frequently and transparently.

Since OER can be updated without requiring a new commercial edition, instructors and institutions have more flexibility to correct errors, add new information, and improve materials continuously. Many open publishing platforms support versioning, errata tracking, and collaborative improvement.

This adaptability helps ensure that course materials remain relevant and aligned with current knowledge.

Research and Resources:

- The Rebus Guide to Publishing Open Textbooks (So Far)
- OpenStax Textbook Revisions, Updates, and Improvements
- Modifying an Open Textbook: What You Need to Know

MYTH 6

Are OER difficult to find, evaluate, and adopt?

Fact: A vast network of repositories, institutional programs, and professional communities make open educational resources easy to discover and use.

In the early years of open education, finding high-quality resources often required significant effort. Today, discovery infrastructure has matured significantly. Large repositories, peer-reviewed collections, and institutional support programs help faculty identify materials aligned with their courses.

Libraries, teaching and learning centers, and instructional designers often provide guidance on locating and evaluating OER. Many repositories also include peer reviews, making it easier for faculty to assess quality and relevance.

Faculty do not need to navigate using or finding OER alone. Support systems exist at both institutional and community levels.

Research and Resources:

- OER Starter Kit - Finding Open Content
- Open Education: Getting Started Guide
- Guide to Open Textbook Essential and Exemplary Features

MYTH 7

Does using OER improve student success?

Fact: Research shows that the adoption of open educational resources supports student success while ensuring all students have access to materials from the start of class.

Access to course materials plays an important role in student success. When students cannot afford required textbooks, they may delay access, share materials, or go without them entirely. OER ensure that every student has immediate and permanent access to course materials.

Research examining OER adoption across institutions has found that students using OER perform as well as, or better than, students using traditional textbooks. Some studies have also found improvements in course completion and reductions in equity gaps.

While some research suggests there are benefits to first day access on its own, only OER offer the combination of first day access and zero cost to students. Nothing is more affordable than free. Together, these factors remove common barriers and support more consistent student engagement and success.

Research and Resources:

- Fixing the Broken Textbooks Market, Fourth Edition
- The Impact of Open Educational Resources on Various Student Success Metrics
- Open Educational Resources Research Case Studies

MYTH 8

How are OER sustained over time?

Fact: Open educational resources are sustained through ongoing institutional investment, shared infrastructure, and collaborative development across the higher education community.

Over the past decade, open education has evolved from isolated projects into established institutional practice. Many colleges and universities now operate formal OER programs supported by libraries, teaching centers, and academic leadership. These programs provide faculty grants, publishing support, and technical infrastructure to support the adoption and creation of open materials.

Library publishing programs, statewide initiatives, and open publishing platforms also play an important role. Because OER can be shared and adapted, resources are not dependent on a single publisher. Multiple institutions and educators can contribute to their ongoing maintenance and improvement.

This shared model helps ensure that OER remain available, current, and sustainable over time.

Research and Resources:

- Charting the Course: Case Studies in OER Sustainability
- SUNY Sustainability Overview
- Sustainability and Justice: Challenges and Opportunities for an Open STEM Education
- Driving OER Sustainability for Student Success (DOERS) Collaborative

MYTH 9

How do OER intersect with emerging technologies, including generative AI?

Fact: Open educational resources provide a flexible, openly licensed foundation that educators and institutions can continue to adapt as new technologies emerge.

Generative AI can assist with tasks such as formatting, translation, and accessibility improvements, but it does not replace the need for expert-developed educational content. OER provide a reliable foundation because materials are created, reviewed, and maintained by educators.

Because OER carry open licenses, faculty and institutions can update, adapt, and improve materials over time, including using new tools where appropriate. This allows educators to evaluate and apply emerging technologies thoughtfully, while maintaining oversight of course content and ensuring it aligns with their instructional goals.

As teaching practices and technologies continue to evolve, openness helps ensure that educational materials remain adaptable, transparent, and responsive to the needs of both educators and students.

Research and Resources:

- ISKME's Guiding Principles for Responsible AI in the World of "Open"
- Creative Commons Guidance on Open Licensing and AI
- Policy Priorities for Generative AI and Open Education

Summary

OER have become an integral part of the educational landscape. What began as a grassroots movement has evolved into a mature and growing ecosystem supported by institutions, faculty, libraries, and shared infrastructure.

Many of the questions addressed in this document reflect the natural evolution of any educational innovation. As awareness has grown, so too has the evidence demonstrating that OER can support high-quality teaching, improve access to course materials, and enable educators to adapt resources to meet the needs of their students.

At its core, open education is about expanding what is possible. It ensures educators have the flexibility to teach effectively and that students have access to the resources they need to learn and succeed. As educational practices and technologies continue to evolve, openness provides a foundation that can adapt alongside them.

Suggested Citation:

SPARC (2026). OER Mythbusting. Washington, DC: SPARC.
sparcopen.org/our-work/oer-mythbusting

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

SPARC
PMB 2096
2001 L Street N.W., Suite 500
Washington, DC 20036
United States

www.sparcopen.org

SPARC