SETTING AUDACIOUS GOALS AND POLICY TO ELIMINATE TEXTBOOK COSTS
A case study of West Hills College’s zero textbook cost initiative

Governing Board Best Practices on College Affordability

AUGUST 2021
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The project focuses on the affordability strategies of the governing boards of five U.S. higher education institutions or systems. The project seeks to explain the role governing board members play in bringing about affordability measures and their relationship with college executives and their agendas. What strategies do they employ? And how has the COVID-19 pandemic changed their approach?

This study of West Hills College focuses on its “Zero Textbook Cost” (ZTC) initiative (referred to commonly in higher education as “open educational resources” or “OER”), and the role its governing board played in driving implementation of this innovative, cost-saving measure for students. OER are quality teaching materials, often digitized, that are intended to be freely used, adapted and shared. In 2016, the board adopted an audacious initial policy of developing OER for “at a minimum, 80% of all degree-applicable programs in the first year.” This bold policy containing a lofty, measurable goal helped fuel the school’s “OERevolution” which, at West Hills College Lemoore where the initiative originated, has resulted in $6 million of savings for students, $3 million in just the last two years. Most impressively, by the fall of 2021 at West Hills College Lemoore, roughly 60% of courses will be delivered via OER or as low textbook cost courses, defined as less than $40.

“Introduciton

“The program has been so successful, the physical bookstore on campus became obsolete and services were moved online. The former bookstore location was repurposed to house a career center and support services for military students.”
ABOUT WEST HILLS COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT (WHCCD)

WHCCD is a public two-year community college district in California encompassing two colleges: one located in Coalinga, the second located in Lemoore. The district resides in an economically disadvantaged part of the San Joaquin Valley, which some observers have dubbed the “Appalachia of the West” to describe the idea the region has been left behind the rest of the state when it comes to economic growth and opportunity.¹

The district serves a rural community where agriculture is the dominant industry and there are many migrant workers. One of the main crops in Coalinga is pistachios. Lemoore is home to the largest Naval Air Station on the west coast. One case study participant described the area as “blue collar” and “so small that there’s no Kmart.” It is critical that the colleges thrive, the interviewee said, because they are some of the district’s largest employers. “There’s lots of pride in the college. And the community depends on the college,” said the interviewee.

The district serves a majority Hispanic/Latino student population: 65 percent in Lemoore and 68 percent in Coalinga. The district serves mostly (62 percent) low-income students who receive Pell grants.

Total Enrollment: 4,198 (Lemoore), 4,359 (Coalinga).² Only slightly more than half of one percent of California’s 2.1 million community college students attend West Hills College.

Net Price: $10,030 (Lemoore), $9,260 (Coalinga)³
GOVERNANCE CHARACTERISTICS

This study is focused on the West Hills Community College District Board of Trustees which has local governing authority. The board consists of seven voting members elected to represent a geographical constituency within the district for 4-year terms.

The Board of Trustees shares governing power with the California Community Colleges (CCC) Board of Governors which sets statewide policy and provides guidance for the 73 districts and 116 colleges that constitute the system. Unlike the district boards of trustees who are directly elected, the Board of Governors is mostly appointed by the governor who appoints 12 of the 17 voting members. The Board of Governors is responsible for the hiring of the statewide chancellor, the chief executive officer of the community college system.

Local boards of trustees’ responsibilities include submitting education programs to the Board of Governors for approval and course approval in approved educational programs. A chancellor is appointed to each community college district by the Board of Trustees, and each individual college in the district has a president. California Education Code directs the Board of Governors to allow local authority and control of the community college districts to the “maximum degree possible.”

Rate setting authority over the community college system resides with the California State Legislature and specific fee caps and restrictions are detailed in the California Education Code. The California Education Code allows local community college districts to set tuition rates for nonresident students. The California Promise Program, under the administration of the chancellor of the California Community Colleges, offers two years of free tuition at a community college for first-time, full-time students in California.
### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1. West Hills College examined where it could control cost of attendance and targeted the elimination of textbook costs which exceed tuition.

2. College board members and staff operate by a guiding principle whereby textbook costs are viewed as a financial barrier to student success that must be overcome.

3. The adoption of a board policy in 2016, with its audacious quantitative goal, helped fuel the college’s adoption of OER.

4. The college’s small size and nimble, team culture enabled aggressive implementation.

5. The proliferation of OER within the college required champions.

6. A formal committee structure accelerated faculty buy-in.

7. Branding and communications campaigns have been critical to persuading audiences to participate.

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To date, WHCCD has saved students $6 million, $3 million in just the last two years.
1. West Hills College examined where it could control cost of attendance and targeted the elimination of textbook costs which exceed tuition.

Readers might need to do a double take to absorb this: In recent years, tuition was lower than the cost of textbooks and supplies for students at West Hills College. That’s right, lower. This can be attributed to low tuition rates established by the California legislature and strong state financial support from them.

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Data source: National Center for Education Statistics

This is atypical among U.S. colleges and universities. Chancellor Emeritus Frank Gornick, who was an early champion for OER at the college during his tenure, stated that, “Our tuition was lower than the cost of books and I think that was a real eye-opener, not only to our faculty but also to our board.”

Board of Trustees Vice President Jeff Levinson admitted tuition is not a very big factor for students in WHCCD’s service area due to the abundance of public and private financial aid available to students to offset their tuition costs.

Therefore, instead of focusing on tuition, West Hills College leadership went to work to eliminate one of students’ biggest costs: textbooks.

“We began to take a look at the cost savings when you [eliminate] the price of a book,” said Gornick. “And I think that’s what really began to motivate a lot of our faculty - when we started showing the number of students we have on Pell grants, and the cost of books versus the cost of tuition to attend our school.”

And this focus on textbook affordability has yielded results. The number of ZTC courses offered and their popularity with students is impressive, particularly for a school of its size. To date, WHCCD has saved students $6 million, $3 million in just the last two years. Most impressively, by the fall of 2021 at West Hills College Lemoore, roughly 60 percent of offered courses will be delivered via OER or low textbook cost courses, defined by WHCCD as less than $40.

The program has been so successful, the physical bookstore on campus became obsolete and services were moved online. The former bookstore location was repurposed to house a career center and support services for military students. The symbolism of the closure isn’t lost on anyone.
POST-COVID-19 PANDEMIC EXTRA INSIGHT:

According to board members, students in WHCCD’s economically disadvantaged service area are struggling due to the pandemic to afford basic human needs, such as food and housing; paying for tuition and books is a luxury many just cannot afford. Statewide enrollment figures bear this out, with WHCCD enrollment decreasing 9.5 percent from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020. Board members believe OER reduces barriers to education for low-income students and are optimistic about its viability post-pandemic, but they also warn that internet bandwidth remains a limitation in many rural communities.
2. College board members and staff operate by a guiding principle whereby textbook costs are viewed as a financial barrier to student success that must be overcome.

Almost every school has a quaint phrase, motto, or tag line that sets it apart. Not all have staying power. Some of these phrases come and go with the aging of a strategic plan or a new ad blitz.

You might think “The Relentless Pursuit of Student Success” sounds trite. But it’s not – it’s the sincere institutional mantra of WHCCD. And if you think the phrase sounds tried or familiar, you’d be wrong. A quick Google search reveals it “belongs” to WHCCD alone.

The relentless pursuit of student success is a guiding principle so ingrained in the culture of the district that each interviewee uttered it unprovoked. Faculty member Michael Chamberlain put it this way: “Well, it means that all of our efforts, all of our initiatives, all that we do, ultimately, we have to be able to point back to how it improves student success. When somebody gets off track or you feel that something is off track, you can just raise that as a question. You don’t want to use it as a weapon, but as a question: how is this moving us toward student success?”

Where does this guiding principle leave ancillaries, like athletics? “It’s tangential to what our focus is,” said Gornick, “which is teaching and learning.”

For board members, if the district genuinely cared about student success, then support for OER was a no-brainer. Board Clerk Nina Oxborrow said the ZTC program would come as a relief for some who would not go to college or complete it because they could not afford textbooks. Levinson’s initial thought was, “As long as the quality of the educational materials was there, seemed like the right thing to do.”

When it comes to “The Relentless Pursuit of Student Success” West Hills College Lemoore’s chief administrator, James Preston, had this to say, “I do truly believe that drives our board, that drives our chancellor, that drives our faculty, that drives our administration. And I believe it’s why ZTC got traction and got off the ground.”
3. The adoption of a board policy in 2016, with its audacious quantitative goal, helped fuel the college’s adoption of OER.

In 2015, the state encouraged and incentivized community college districts to pursue OER adoption and local plans by dangling a new grant program focused on building local OER capacity. Typical within higher education, the chief executive at that time, Dr. Frank Gornick, brought the idea of OER to the board. The board was enthusiastic about the idea but not particularly expert about OER, which remains true today.

Normally, the board and staff would have a back and forth about proposals. Gornick recalled, “Everybody agreed to the concept of what we wanted to do because they saw the return on investment. It’s very tangible. We could always demonstrate how it’s going to benefit the students.”

On April 19, 2016, the board adopted the following policy:

**Board Policy 4042:** “The District and its faculty are committed to identifying, promoting the use of, and encouraging the development and/or adoption of high-quality and viable OER for course textbooks and other digital materials wherever possible to include, at a minimum, 80 percent of all degree-applicable programs in the first year.”

With its policy, the board adopted an audacious quantitative goal of moving to 80 percent OER, setting a very high bar that no one in America – save West Hills College – is close to achieving today. In doing so, the board codified an aspiration.

Gornick said the policy and lofty quantitative goal at the time was as much a “cultural statement” as anything else. The board wanted to send a message that they supported the chancellor and staff in this initiative, he said. Board member Oxborrow said writing an OER policy, like other board policies, was also used for accountability in that, “If we say we’re going to do something, then we’re going to get it done. No excuses.”

The senior staff got the message. Lemoore’s Preston said the policy “was there really to kind of drive things, obviously.” Preston commended Gornick for effectively “using policy and procedures to plant seeds” then “stepping back and watching them grow.” He said the policy initially was a kind of carrot-and-stick that helped the initiative to gain traction. “But the culture very quickly aligned with the policy.”

An amended version of the policy, adopted by the board on May 21, 2019, removed the quantitative goal because the spirit of the policy had been operationalized by this time. The revised goal (“100% of General Education Courses”) was added to the 2016-2020 strategic plan instead, where progress would be regularly tracked. This college-wide goal even trickled down to the Lemoore campus strategic plan, said Chancellor Kristin Clark.
4. The college’s small size and nimble, team culture enabled aggressive implementation.

For some institutions, the lack of legacy resources or amassed private philanthropy, or modest enrollment revenue would have a paralyzing effect on their culture. But West Hills College has notched big accomplishments in spite of those realities.

From its leadership on OER to winning competitive state and federal grants to receiving state and national honors for innovation and improvement, West Hills College’s small size isn’t a hindrance. In fact, it uses its size to its advantage.

While some large, urban community college districts may “just thrive on inertia,” as former Chancellor Van Horn put it, WHCCD has no choice but be nimble and innovative for it to thrive.

Said board member Oxborrow, “We don’t have resources that colleges in bigger communities have. So, we have to rely on each other... We don’t always have the funding for staff. So, our staff might do two or three different jobs... It’s just whatever you have to do to get the job done; you do it as a team. And for the most part, everybody here thinks that way.”

In its academic ranks, the organization is flatter than usual: consider that West Hills College has no department chairs.

“Small rural districts like ours that are nimble and agile by design, based on how we built ourselves, can move quickly,” said Van Horn. “We don’t have those sixteen layers of governance.”

Van Horn said that OER success is a “classic example” of how quickly the college can move and aggressively pursue a meaningful, new initiative. He sees a lack of barriers between employee classifications – barriers that would normally stand in the way of collaboration – increasing the willingness for employees to try something new and outside of their traditional lane of operation.

Faculty members agree. “The advantage is that we can move a little bit faster; we are more nimble,” said Chamberlain. “But that also means you have to wear a lot of hats and you have to take on a lot of responsibilities. So, administration and faculty have to work together closely.”
5. The proliferation of OER within the college required champions.

Whether big college or small, advancing an initiative of this magnitude requires champions at multiple levels. Although incentives such as a generous state grant program and ambitious board policy helped OER take root at West Hills College Lemoore, it was a small number of dedicated individuals who drove the unparalleled success we see today.

And there was no bigger champion than the one at the top. Chancellor Emeritus Gornick’s former colleagues laud him as a visionary who recognized the opportunity of OER long before others. Gornick had the unwavering support of his board who viewed their most important task as hiring the right person for the job of chancellor, then supporting them. Gornick, in turn, instilled confidence in his cabinet to innovate, even at the risk of failure.

However, the effectiveness of a campus initiative like OER rises or falls with faculty who are on the front lines teaching students. “Initiatives that are rooted in teaching and learning, like OER, belong to faculty,” said Chancellor Kristin Clark.

“However, even when faculty support an initiative, it doesn’t gain traction without a strategic vision and commitment of resources,” she continued. “As senior administrators, we were intentional in the way we supported our OERevolution.” Consistent with norms of academic freedom, course texts are not selected by chancellors or any other administrator. This responsibility remains the purview of West Hills College faculty.

Although the move to teach using OER materials was encouraged, it was also entirely voluntary. Clark said they allocated resources to incentivize faculty development of OER through small grants and restricted funding. Still, transitioning to OER is more labor intensive for faculty than continuing to assign students costly textbooks. For OER to proliferate, Gornick and Clark, who was serving then as Lemoore president, would need allies closer to faculty who would partner with and support faculty willing to take on the extra work.

The chancellor found allies in Preston, who was Lemoore’s vice president of educational services at that time, a pair of librarians, and a few others who made up a tight core team. Preston recalls being won over after a series of demonstrations from experts outside the college and learning of the considerable savings that could be passed on to students by transitioning away from a single course textbook.

Consequently, it was the Lemoore campus, where Clark and these allies were concentrated, that was the pacesetter for OER in WHCCD. Librarian Ron Oxford led the implementation of multiple OER external grants and librarian Kelsey Smith helped faculty more easily convert their courses to ZTC by finding available quality resources elsewhere. And with each individual course conversion success, faculty confidence grew and so did their willingness to share their own knowledge and experience with fellow faculty. Think dominoes. In fact, now ZTC includes entire degrees at the college, such as elementary education, psychology, and sociology, thanks to momentum generated from earlier victories in course conversion.

And all along the way, Preston, was rooting the faculty on, “like a football coach,” according to board member Oxborrow, “trying to motivate his players.”
6. A formal committee structure accelerated faculty buy-in.

Despite excitement from a small core group, the college was not immune to early skepticism about its goals. Some faculty were concerned that the subpar quality of OER available for certain subjects, others were concerned about what appeared to be administrative encroachment on academic freedom by intervening in the time-honored tradition of faculty right to text selection.

Chamberlain, who teaches mathematics, recalls not being totally onboard at the outset. He said he was skeptical that faculty would adopt OER because they were mostly expert in their content area, but not in curriculum development. “I didn’t really think more than about 5% of the population could actually do this,” he said.

Although success on OER at West Hills College Lemoore came quickly, it did not happen overnight. It happened incrementally, and success was never a foregone conclusion.

Preston said that a faculty member came to him early in the process and critiqued the close-to-the-vest initiative that seemed to leave out lots of potential faculty allies whose participation would be critical to widespread adoption.

If OER was to evolve beyond a boutique concern, it would need the support and infrastructure of a formal committee, they decided.

The OER committee would be co-chaired by Preston and sociology faculty member Vera Kennedy who was the first faculty member to utilize OER in her classes and had been a strong advocate both locally and nationally for OER. Preston reported back to the Institutional Effectiveness and Student Success Committee and Kennedy to the Academic Senate. The OER committee, which has representatives from across the college as well as students, has allowed for more inputs into the initiative from diverse academic fields and perspectives.

Not only did the formal committee serve to validate OER on campus, the information that freely flowed as a result has helped turn OER skeptics into evangelists.

“A DEEPER DIVE

“As senior administrators, we were intentional in the way we supported our OERevolution, [including] goals in both West Hill College Lemoore’s previous strategic plan (to increase the number of OER course sections) and a goal to increase course sections and ZTC degrees/certificates in the College’s new strategic plan.”

Kristin Clark
Chancellor
West Hills Community College District
7. Branding and communications campaigns have been critical to persuading audiences to participate.

The term “open educational resources” is easily misunderstood, if not totally lacking in effectively communicating the nature of this disruptive innovation and its benefits. If OER was being pitched on the popular television show “Shark Tank,” the shark investors might tell the entrepreneurs they need new and better packaging if they expect to sell more of their product.

Preston and other leaders at West Hills College Lemoore recognized this, so they were very intentional about their word choices, which shifted depending on the audience. When talking with students about the initiative, for example, it is important to use language they connect with, Preston said. OER isn’t “OER” for this audience. It’s been rebranded as “ZTC,” short for “Zero Textbook Costs.” This nomenclature directly and succinctly expresses the benefits of the program (i.e. avoiding the high cost of textbooks).

And among internal audiences of administrators and faculty, OER isn’t just any other college initiative – it’s an “OERevolution.” The college calls it a “revolution against outrageous textbook costs and an evolution in teaching and learning.” Whatever you call it, OER at West Hills College Lemoore is a movement that is fundamentally changing the relationship for the better between faculty members and the students they teach. And all faculty are invited to join this movement.

But persuading these audiences to increase their participation does not hinge on semantics alone.

The OERevolution includes regular communications updates, events, and — yes — even branded t-shirts. Celebrating small victories and larger milestones was key to building internal enthusiasm for the ZTC program. At OERevolution events, it’s commonplace for faculty to get called out by name in front of their peers when their actions translate to savings for students, evoking much pride.

Chamberlain, the math instructor, said the most convincing information for him was hearing first-person at these meetings what other faculty accomplished and how they were acknowledged for it.

But it wasn’t all rah-rah. West Hills College Lemoore took very seriously the duty to report and chart where the college had been when the initiative began and how it progressed over years. The data on course modifications and student savings were specific and measurable. “There was always an accounting,” Chamberlain said.
METHODS

The project director conducted interviews, using a semi-structured interview guide, with West Hills College board members and staff, including Board Vice President Jeff Levinson, Board Clerk Nina Oxborrow, Chancellor Kristin Clark, former Chancellor Stuart Van Horn, Chancellor Emeritus Frank Gornick, Interim President West Hills College Lemoore James Preston, and math instructor Michael Chamberlain. In addition to the interviews, the project director conducted a document review of current and past board policies and other relevant documentation.

Note: At the time of this study, Stuart Van Horn was serving as chancellor. He retired on June 30, 2021 and is now former chancellor. Kristin Clark was president of Lemoore campus; she currently serves as chancellor for the district. James Preston was the vice president of educational services at West Hills College Lemoore; he currently serves as its interim president.
END NOTES


3. National Center for Education Statistics, College Navigator


Partners for College Affordability and Public Trust (Partners) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to making high-quality, affordable college education a reality for all Americans.