Open Courseware Initiatives and the Challenge of Sustainability

ike all other academic digital resources, open courseware initiatives face substantial challenges in developing successful models for long-term sustainability. Lauded for their efforts to expand access to elite classrooms, these projects now find themselves at a critical juncture.

The first such initiative launched in 2001, when MIT announced its landmark OpenCourseWare (OCW) project to publish versions of nearly all its courses online. Nearly a decade later, hundreds of open courseware projects now operate at colleges and universities around the world. Often begun in better economic times, and initially funded by foundations committed to the principle of open educational resources, these efforts now risk being seen as luxuries that are no longer affordable in an era of spending cuts.

Within the tight-knit field of open courseware, none of this is news. Sustainability is a perennial topic of conversation among project leaders and funders and has long been a subject for conference discussions, a field to be filled in on grant applications, and a general source of anxiety for all involved. Joel M. Smith, Carnegie Mellon's CIO and principal investigator for the university's Open Learning Initiative (OLI), has said that members of the open courseware community often “try to have a meeting about sustainability and . . . all dance around it—and that's something we really need to figure out.”

Given that open courseware initiatives are—and want to remain—freely available to the public, obtaining the necessary financial resources to keep them up-to-date and relevant raises considerable challenges in a constantly changing digital environment. A number of revenue-generating options have been considered or pursued but have met with limited success so far. Various “freemium” models—in which some content and functionality are free while premium features must be paid for—remain largely experimental and have yet to yield much earned income. Most host institutions have been averse to running advertisements on their courseware sites, and continuing to chase foundation money or large private donors carries an element of uncertainty. This leaves the parent institutions that have initiated, housed, and staffed these projects as the most obvious long-term funders to take over when external monies inevitably expire. And with open courseware initiatives' six- to mid-seven-figure annual operating budgets, major research institutions would seem capable of providing continuing support—if the incentives are there. But it is far from guaranteed that the host institutions will be willing to shoulder this burden in perpetuity, particularly during these lean times.

How can an online resource come to be seen as so essential that a university would want to invest in its ongoing maintenance and improvement? The burgeoning field of open courseware illustrates how a digital resource—even one primarily designed to serve an audience beyond the campus community—can locate and build on its internal value to its parent institution. A look at the progress to date of some of the more prominent open courseware initiatives reveals several strategies that can increase an institution’s willingness to assume ongoing financial responsibility for such projects, thus improving chances of long-term sustainability:

- **Involve top campus leaders, early and often.** The MIT OCW concept was first raised in a faculty committee convened by the provost, and then-President Charles Vest personally reached out to leaders of the Mellon and Hewlett Foundations to fund it. Vest's interest in championing the initiative signaled its immediate perceived value, and his frequent publications and speeches on the subject can only have helped to draw positive publicity. Vest's successor, President Susan Hockfield, maintains a commitment to OCW, indicating that exceptionally strong initial leadership can establish institutional priorities that transcend an individual administrator's tenure.

- **Demonstrate a connection to the institution's overall strategic goals.** Global engagement has been a top priority for Yale University for the past decade, with the aim of increasing its presence on the world stage. The Open Yale Courses initiative, a suite of high-quality lecture videos of introductory courses from distinguished professors, feeds directly into this overall strategy by providing a meticulously branded and packaged look at the university's classroom experience that can be easily viewed anywhere in the world.

- **Create a resource that has practical benefits for enrolled students.** The webcast.berkeley project, which records every lecture to its site within a day of their completion, creates a resource that has practical benefits for enrolled students.

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The viewpoint "Open Courseware Initiatives and the Challenge of Sustainability" was written by Joanne Kossuth, Viewpoints Department Editor. It was published in the July/August 2011 issue of Educause Review.
tion, provides a welcome study aid for students. Unlike MIT and Yale, whose courseware projects were initially funded with a generous influx of foundation support, the University of California–Berkeley has always been responsible for funding webcast.berkeley. According to Provost George W. Breslauer, the reason is simple: “It makes our students happier; that’s a strategic goal. It augments the channels through which they can learn.”

- Show direct returns in areas like alumni giving or new student recruiting. Through user surveys, MIT OCW has learned that one-third of incoming freshmen feel OCW significantly influenced their choice of college and that one-half of alumni respondents have used OCW.

- Provide value to stakeholders outside the campus community, such as the governments that control institutions’ budgets or permit their tax-exempt status. Former UC-Berkeley Provost Paul R. Gray mentioned that the university usually attracts press based on faculty research outputs, “but the people of California value the teaching side over the research side,” so webcast.berkeley “is a chance to get some public recognition for the educational role and teaching.”

- Demonstrate a contribution to improved student learning or reduced instructional costs. Carnegie Mellon's OLI has offered evidence that courseware can contribute directly to student learning (at least in some disciplines) and may even improve learning outcomes. Effective for knowledge acquisition and retention, this highly interactive type of courseware also has the potential to reduce instructional costs per student—if deployed at sufficient scale. Though the high upfront cost of such an institutional model may prove challenging for single colleges or universities to meet, the UC system is reviewing options for a system-level sustainability model along similar lines.

Of course, each open courseware initiative—and each institutional setting—is unique; there is no “one size fits all” path to sustainability. A single project need not implement all of these strategies, nor is there any guarantee that pursuing these tactics, in isolation or in combination, will be enough. But building a web of stakeholders with vested interests in the continued growth and success of the project is clearly beneficial.

Based on the list above, it appears that the more an initiative can demonstrate its value to a college or university—and the more embedded it is in the overall life of that institution—the more likely the host campus will be to assume the burden of funding it in perpetuity. Many of these strategies reflect efforts to add value within existing budget areas: activities such as marketing, student support services, alumni relations, and relationships with the surrounding community and the world at large. Should a resource such as open courseware prove to be a valuable contribution to any of these ongoing activities, it may eventually be folded into the institution’s general cost of doing business—and thus secure its financial future.

Notes
1. Interview with Joel M. Smith, September 10, 2008.
2. Interview with George W. Breslauer, June 9, 2009.


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