Montgomery College is embarking on a new strategic plan to guide the College over the next five years. Titled MC 2025, the plan will serve as the overarching plan for other master plans at the College, including the Academic Master Plan and the Achieving the Dream (ATD) student success work. Specific strategies are identified to support each of the six different goals approved by the Board of Trustees:

- Empower students to start smart and succeed
- Enhance transformational teaching practices and learning environments
- Fuel the economy and drive economic mobility
- Build, engage, and strengthen community partnerships
- Invest in our employees
- Protect affordability

Each of the goals is grounded in the concepts of excellence, rigor and equity. With the focus of these three lenses, I started thinking about our OER/Z-course work and MC Open, the institutional umbrella under which the work of "open" and open pedagogy lives. https://www.montgomerycollege.edu/academics/mc-open/.

Montgomery College intentionally began its journey of openness with the 2016 ATD grant that allowed us to create a General Studies Z-degree, with Z meaning zero-cost textbooks. A Business degree has since followed, and Criminal Justice and Early Childhood Education are nearing completion. Prior to the grant, the college had a number of faculty who were not requiring students to purchase texts, but the courses could not be accurately identified in the course schedule. The ATD grant compelled us to create a proper code so students could filter for Z-courses.

Excellence

The faculty of Montgomery College have been responsible stewards of maintaining academic excellence in their use of OER and in implementing Z-courses. Initial concerns about the quality of material has dissipated. Most faculty have found resources that adequately cover the necessary subject matter, and what is missing in one resource is supplemented by another. As the variety of resources increases, and as individual faculty members become more comfortable sharing to the commons, concerns should continue to erode about the excellence of material.

This journey of openness has also offered faculty a greater sense of agency as they maintain academic excellence in their teaching environments. More specifically, this initiative potentially gives faculty the opportunity to have the freedom to develop content that meets the needs of their students. As content experts and institutional representatives, faculty are in a powerful position to include their students in the learning process by placing them at the center of this process. Students are consequently empowered to maintain the academic excellence alongside their instructors, also making them agents of change in higher education.

Moreover, the excellence in the teaching itself has been maintained. A survey of 343 students as part of the ATD grant revealed that 60 percent said the quality of teaching in a Z-course was slightly higher or much higher when compared to a non Z-course. Only 5 percent stated it was slightly lower or much lower. These results are consistent with national results.

Rigor

When Montgomery College first began its OER/Z-course work, there were basically two objectives, which are common to many institutions around the country:

1. Save students money
2. Don't negatively impact academic standards or academic success

The first is easy to quantify. Since being able to track Z-courses in the course schedules, Montgomery College has saved students about $2.5 million in textbook costs. Prevailing opinions suggest that students take that saved money and re-invest in themselves by taking more courses. In fact, a recent release of the Montgomery College Student Success Score Card shows that fall-to-spring retention over a five-year period has increased from 70.8 percent to 79.5 percent. All attributed to Z-courses? Absolutely not. But the initiative is seemingly a factor.

The second objective is easy to demonstrate. Four semesters worth of data show that student success has not been negatively impacted by faculty moving to OER or zero-cost textbooks. In the fall 2018 semester, success in Z-courses and non Z-courses was 76 percent, with success being defined as a grade of A, B or C.

In fact, across certain demographics, success is better in Z-courses when compared to non Z-courses. Black males did almost 3 percentage points better in Fall 2018 Z-courses compared to those courses using a traditional proprietary textbook. In the Spring 2018 semester, Hispanic males saw a success rate in Z-courses at almost 92 percent, compared to 80 percent in non Z-courses. Coincidentally, the increase in graduating Hispanic students this year is larger than any other racial/ethnic group.

Equity

As Montgomery College has embraced OER efforts by our faculty, the focus has been on equity, meaning OER implementation has become a social justice issue. It's about providing everyone in Montgomery County with access to education and not letting the cost of textbooks be a deterrent.

The ATD grant student survey mentioned earlier revealed that 61 percent of MC students said there have been times when they did not buy or rent the required textbook or materials for a class, eight percentage points higher than the national response. Forty-eight percent of the students said the reason was because they could not afford them.

Providing equitable access to education has to include equitable access to materials. By increasing access to education, we increase access to knowledge. In fact, the United Nations charged all countries that adopted the Sustainable Development Agenda to reach the 17 Sustainable Development Goals by the year 2030, and among those goals is improving the quality of and increasing access to education. OER makes that promise.

Pakastini activist Malala Yousafzai, when fighting for the educational rights of women in her homeland, said, "I raise up my voice-not so I can shout but so that those without a voice can be heard...we cannot succeed when half of us are held back."

Let us take the same approach with OER and not let the cost of textbooks hold anyone back, all the while sustaining excellence, maintaining rigor and embracing equity.