MIDWESTERN HIGHER EDUCATION COMPACT

Open in Prison Spaces: Exploring the Potential of OER in Higher Education in Prison

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ITHAKA S+R

Open in Prison Spaces

Exploring the Potential of Open Educational Resources in Higher Education in Prison

4 November 2026

Presented by Ess Pokornowski and Sindy Lopez

A Collaborative Project

Ithaka S+R performed a brief, exploratory study commissioned by the Midwestern Higher Education Compact (MHEC) in collaboration with the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE) to explore opportunities and limitations of OER in higher education in prison.

The Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE) also participated in high level conversations.

Guiding Questions

How can open education resources and practices support education and information access in prisons?

How are they already being used in the field of higher education in prison now?

What challenges and potential exist for their use in the future?

Exploratory Qualitative Research

Methods:

- Desk research and literature review
- Policy analysis
- Semi-structured interviews

13 Interview Participants (5 focus group, 8 interviews) drawn from MHEC and NEBHE member states:

- Higher education in prison administrators and staff
- DOC staff
- Academic and Correctional Librarians

Key Findings

- **OER are already available inside prisons, though how they are deployed varies widely.**
- **OER can offer prison education programs greater affordability, flexibility, and continuity.**
- **OER does not eliminate – and can be complicated by – the significant constraints governing education and information access in prison settings.**
- **It starts with dialogue. The administrators, instructors, and students in higher education in prison programs understand their specific context, OER experts and practitioners may need to think creatively to support them.**

Interview Findings

Benefits of OER in HEP

Affordability

Benefits include:

- reducing textbook expenses
- preserving financial aid resources/stretching Pell funding further.

Example from interviewee: ‘printed and bound OER materials often cost under $50.

Navigating Logistical Challenges

Reduced logistical challenges in delivering educational materials in facilities:

- OER provides flexibility when textbook delivery is unreliable
- Ability to print alternative readings on short notice while waiting for print materials to arrive

Interview Findings

Benefits of OER in HEP

Re-using Educational Materials
Because OER are openly licensed, programs can copy materials; modify text and examples; print additional copies; share resources across facilities.

Reusable course materials support program sustainability through:

- no additional licensing fees
- reduced administrative burden

Smoother Educational Transitions
When course materials are only physical textbooks students may lose access and coursework is interrupted if they are transferred.

OER accessed through devices/LMS allows students to retain materials during transfer.

Potential impact:

- Smoother educational transitions
- Academic persistence

Interview Findings

Challenges in Implementing OER in HEP

Correctional Infrastructure

Interviewees highlighted several major barriers:

- Limited internet and bandwidth
- Blocked external links
- Restrictions on multimedia content

Large files (e.g., PDFs and videos) can be difficult for students to access.

These factors make born-digital OER difficult to deploy.

Interview Findings

Challenges in Implementing OER in HEP

The Human Costs of OER

Adapting OER requires significant labor:

- reviewing materials
- correcting errors
- aligning with course content
- creating missing teaching materials

Hidden costs include:

- faculty time
- instructional design work
- administrative coordination

Quality Concerns and Content Gaps

Availability of OER varies:

- More OER for introductory and general education courses.
- Limited coverage for upper-level courses/specialized disciplines
- Rely on commercial textbooks when OER unavailable.
- Lack of supplementary materials

Some instructors remain skeptical of quality. Prefer commercial textbooks that provide instructor manuals/ teaching tools

Opportunities

Expanding Informal Learning

OER could support learning beyond formal programs.Potential uses include:

- prison library collections of open textbooks
- supplemental learning resources

Benefits:

- supports self-directed learning
- expands access to educational content
- serves incarcerated individuals not enrolled in programs.

Also, OER could support informal learning pathways through:

- independent study
- college readiness
- credit-by-exam pathways

Example potential model:

- self-paced modules
- preparation for credit exams

These pathways could expand educational mobility within correctional systems.

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Consider

Accessibility as Opportunity and Challenge with OER

- **Accessibility considerations and formatting adaptability can be an opportunity and a challenge.**
  - The ability to adapt, edit, and alter OER has allowed some practitioners to create more accessible course texts – with large text or audiobook adaptations making learning materials more accessible for learners who are blind or have low-vision.
  - One interviewee noted that remediating open education texts that were not written and designed in accessible formats, or in formats not designed to be displayed on the programs or devices available in prison, created additional labor and became a factor in text selection.

Consider

Open Education in Prison Environments

- **Carceral Settings Exacerbate Known Challenges to Implementing OE:** Challenges like insufficient infrastructure, outdated or restricted technology, and policy-driven access limits constrain engagement with open and distance education.
- **Carceral Settings Provide Unique, Additional Barriers to Successful Implementation:**
  - When OER is available, inconsistent device access, movement restrictions, platform limitations, and institutional rules create additional barriers.
  - Implementation would be complex and uneven: major variations in education and technology access within and across states would complicate implementation.
- **Is "Open" possible in carceral space?** Restrictions, surveillance, censorship, and technological infrastructure challenges complicate how open any access or instruction can be in prisons. (hidde tripp, 2025)

Moving to Action

How OER Practitioners Can Get Involved

- Find out who you need to talk to…
- Start by speaking and coordinating with stakeholders.
- Prepare to navigate the intersection of two large bureaucratic systems.
- If you are rolling out new OER inside prisons, prepare for the labor costs and the time required.
- Consider with faculty and prison administrators and staff: how can you align educational materials across instructional settings and learning environments.

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Thank you and time for Q&A!