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Letters for Change: A Scalable Approach for Student OER Advocacy

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Letters for Change: A Scalable Approach for Student OER Advocacy

Abstract

Learn about a library-led activity designed to empower undergraduate students to advocate for OER at the course level. The exercise helps students research alternative materials and invites them to write a letter to a professor suggesting replacement of commercial course materials with zero-cost or affordable materials.

The Gettysburg College Library offers a one-semester career exploration in which undergraduate interns learn about all facets of academic library work. A key goal for the Scholarly Communications department's contribution is for students to understand the current landscape of textbook publishing, including OER, affordable alternatives, and publisher-led initiatives, in order to effectively advocate for sustainable, accessible, high-quality materials. A structured activity helps students learn about the range of OER that are available to support college courses and then asks students to begin developing an advocate's voice. A librarian will share more information about the internship and this specific exercise. Next, a spring 2022 intern will explain how he tackled the research required for the exercise and ultimately sent personal letters to two professors advocating for them to adopt alternative, zero-cost titles in place of commercial textbooks. He will also explain what the process taught him about open textbooks and student advocacy.

Attend to hear how professors responded upon receiving these letters! This activity is scalable to different types of institutions. It will be shared with an open license, in hopes that other ALPA schools will use it or adapt it for local use.

Keywords

oer, open educational resources, advocacy, student advocacy

Disciplines

Scholarly Communication

Comments

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Letters for Change:
A Scalable Approach for S
OER Advocacy

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Communications, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College

Theodore Szpakowski, Gettysburg College Class of 2025

Introduce ourselves.
Also mention that these slides (with notes) are available in Gettysburg College's open
access institutional repository, in case that helps people relax about taking notes.

Holley Internship for Current Students

Spring 2022 Holley Interns

- Career exploration
- Spring semester
- Rotation model
- Develop professional skills
- 6-8 hours/week
- PAID ($10/hour)
- Cohort experience

[JANELLE]
Before I describe the "letters for change" activity, it's helpful to get some context about the Holley Internship. This is a career exploration experience for current students taking place in the spring semester. It's designed to expose students to all facets of work in our academic library, so we use a rotational model that includes all five departments. The interns spend two weeks on each department rotation; the semester is rounded out with one week of introductory activities at the beginning and three weeks at the end for final projects. In addition to learning about the work that each library department does, we established a goal of helping the interns develop professional skills that can translate to any job.

Time commitment to this internship was 6-8 hours per week and, like all our internships, it is a paid experience. We designed it as a cohort experience and hoped to hire 3-4 students in our inaugural group - you can see that we hired four fantastic individuals!

Scholarly Communications rotation

Learning Goals

After completing the Scholarly Communications rotation, Holley interns will be able to:

Understand the current landscape of textbook publishing, including OER, affordable alternatives (e.g., library-licensed and low-cost materials), and publisher-led initiatives (automatic textbook billing and flat-fee textbook programs), in order to effectively advocate for sustainable, accessible, high-quality materials

Now I'll focus more on the rotation in my library department: Scholarly Communications. We had ambitious learning goals for this two-week period, which covered topics such as the systems that support the "scholarly conversation," the role of open access in scholarly publishing, more detail about institutional repositories, and copyright basics. The goal most relevant to the letter-writing project was this one:

Understand the current landscape of textbook publishing, including OER, affordable alternatives (e.g., library-licensed and low-cost materials), and publisher-led initiatives (automatic textbook billing and flat-fee textbook programs), in order to effectively advocate for sustainable, accessible, high-quality materials

How did we teach this? 1/3
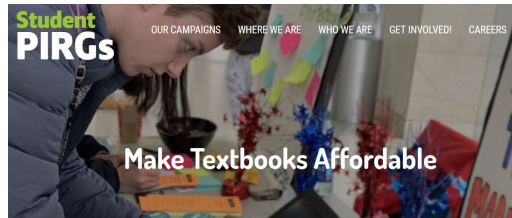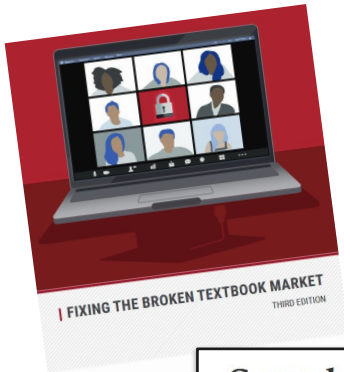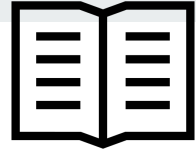
All departments rotations approached their learning goals via a combination of independent activities (like readings and videos) and in-person activities (done with library staff and at least one additional intern).

In Scholarly Communications, we assigned a variety of readings over the 2-week rotation - 7 readings, actually. That may sound like a lot, but we used the Read-O-Meter to estimate reading times, and believe it or not, all readings combined took only 40 minutes to read at an average pace! I won't list all the reading assignments, but we included a variety of things, from national reports to hyper-local resources.

In general for this internship, we assigned a lot of readings, but very few were scholarly journal articles. We wanted to keep the readings short, accessible, interesting, and highly relevant to the learning goals.
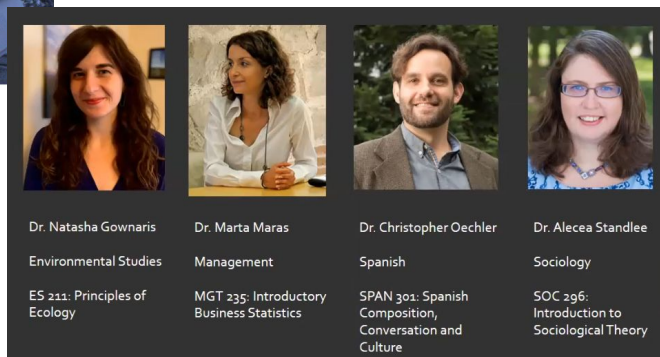
We also assigned a video for each week - each was about 1 hour long, but we felt the engagement factor was high enough to assign them.

In Week 1, we assigned "Beyond Free: A Social Justice Vision for Open Education" by Rajiv Jhangiani. Many of the folks attending today will be familiar with Rajiv's work and understand that it is sheer pleasure to listen to him speak for one hour! The interns were a tad skeptical but they ended up joining the Rajiv Fan Club.

In Week 2, we assigned a recording of a campus event we organized with our Center for Teaching and Learning that featured four Gettysburg College professors talking about the work they've done to adopt and/or remix OER for their courses. We knew the interns would be very interested in how some of our own faculty approach this work.

How did we teach this? 3/3
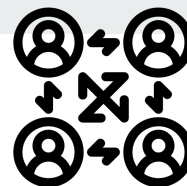
Week 1 - OER Activity

- Two hours
- Learn about the range of OER that are available to support college courses
- Begin to find and develop an advocate's voice

Week 2 - Advocating for Textbook Affordability

- One hour
- Learn about the previous work of student activists at Gettysburg College
- Learn about what student activists on other campuses have done
- Brainstorm actions that could advance textbook affordability on our campus

Finally, here is how we chose to use our limited in-person time with the interns. We jumped right into the OER activity in the first week, which is what today's presentation is about. I'll show you more of that next.

In the second week, we went deeper into advocacy and activism by learning what other Gettysburg students have done as well as how students on other campuses have approached this work. We wrapped everything up by brainstorming actions that we could take on our own campus.

These in-person sessions were designed to be both active and interactive. While chunks of the activities were individual, we built in ways for the interns to share their ideas and get feedback from one another and from library staff.

As a librarian, I really looked forward to these hours with the interns - they had fantastic insights and questions every single day!

OER Activity for Week 1 - https://tinyurl.com/oeractivity

Now let's focus in on the aforementioned OER Activity. This exercise is openly licensed and available in our open access institutional repository so others can reuse it as they like. https://tinyurl.com/oeractivity
https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/librarypubs/161/

Here is a screenshot of the activity for Week 1. You can see that it is formatted like a worksheet. Students were given paper copies as well as a digital file, so they chose individually whether to write or type their work.

The activity is broken into 3 steps which I'll go through quickly.

Step 1 - your books and costs

Course	Required books/course materials, and cost	Total cost for the class
	Total cost for ALL required books this semester:	$

First, we asked interns to list all their required books for the classes they were in that semester, as well as their costs. We directed them to their syllabi in the LMS as well as the bookstore website. For simplicity and consistency, we asked them to list the "buy new" price for each title. We know that not all students buy a new copy, but we had to streamline.

Step 2 - zero-cost alternatives

Open Textbook Library

OER COMMONS
OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

MUSCAT Plus searches for books, journal articles, media, and more in Musselman Library and beyond.

	Everything

Search   **Advanced Search >**

Next, we began to explore zero-cost alternatives that cover the same or similar content as the assigned texts. In order to keep the parameters manageable, we directed them to just 3 tools. We started with the Open Textbook Library and then moved to OER Commons (with some instruction about using the filters to limit to textbooks). We also looked at our own library catalog, MUSCAT Plus, and limited to ebooks. Looking for library-licensed ebooks was especially helpful for humanities classes.

Step 3 - write a letter

To complete this activity, write a letter to your professor advocating for them to adopt an alternative, zero-cost title in place of a commercial textbook.

Be sure to incorporate information you've learned in your independent reading in addition to suggesting a specific title change.

Share your letter with the group in Teams. It is optional to send the letter to the professor... but remember, if you don't ask, you don't get!

Finally, as a summative activity, we asked interns to write a letter to one of their professors advocating for a textbook change. This assignment allowed students to reference the macro level research they learned about in the readings and videos and also make very specific recommendations about expensive books and potential zero-cost replacements.

Interns shared the letters with each other and the library team, but were not required to send them to their professors.

As you probably already surmised, my student colleague Theo chose to send his letter to a professor. In fact, he was so engaged by this activity that he went through it a second time for another class and sent that letter, too!

I'm going to hand it over to him so you can hear more about how he approached the activity…and what happened after he sent his letters!
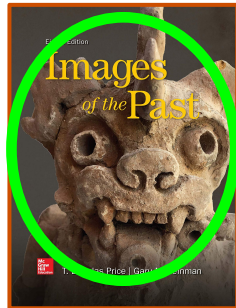
Which book should I choose?

ANTH 106
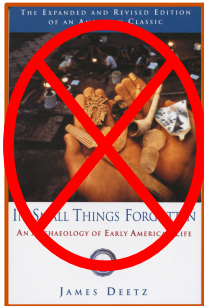
HIST 110
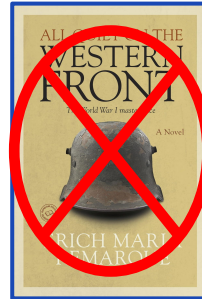
General nonfiction
$17
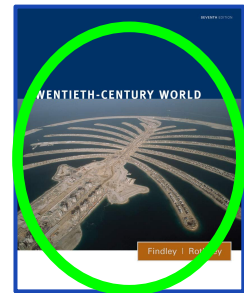
Textbook
$70 rent only

Novel
$17

Textbook
$130 at bookstore

[THEO]
Okay, so now at this point I'm going to take your step by step again, this time from the student perspective. I did this project twice, so you get two examples! The two classes are ANTH 106, Intro to Archaeology, and Hist 110, Twentieth Century World History. The first step in this project was to identify which book I wanted to replace with a zero-cost alternative. Let's look at the two books I used in ANTH 106.

Two clicks: books show up on screen. Okay, so the first book I have here is "In Small Things Forgotten". Click: textbox appears. It's a general nonfiction book, and the buy new cost is $17 at the bookstore. Then we have "Images of the Past". Click: textbox appears. It's a standard textbook, it's only available for rent, and the cost is $70. The first book is a lot cheaper, and people will have the option to keep it, sell it, or pass it on. Granted, it'll probably sell for a dollar, but it's better than nothing. There's also less likely to be a match in OER form, since it's not a textbook. Click: X appears. For this reason, I chose to focus on the second one. Click: circle appears.

Now, for history. Two clicks: books show up on screen. The first book is "All Quiet on the Western Front". Click: textbook appears. It's a novel, it's $17 to buy new. We also have "Twentieth Century World", which is $130. These are just two of the seven books required for this class. In this case, one of these books is a lot more specific than the others. Do you think it's going to be easier to find an overview of the 20th century that's open access, or a novel about WW1 written by a German veteran within a decade of the war's end that's open access? I think it's going to be the textbook. Two clicks: X and circle appear.

What we could do, and ended up doing later, for a book like All Quiet is find a library license. However, I chose to focus on OER specifically rather than other options that

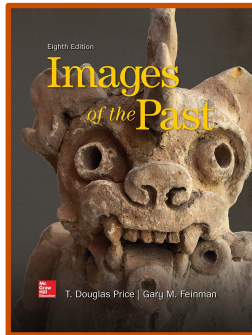are zero-cost to students but not open access.

Finding a Replacement

The two places I looked for open textbooks were the Open Textbook Library and OER Commons. The first is specifically textbooks, while the other has a wider variety of resources.

Breaking It Down

Digging into Archaeology
A Brief OER Introduction to Archaeology with Activities

Images of the Past
Eighth Edition
T. Douglas Price | Gary M. Feinman

World History: Cultures, States, and Societies (Global Remix)

Common archaeological methods

Human prehistory discovered by archaeologists
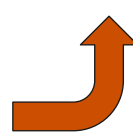
A match for Twentieth Century World was pretty easy to find, but Images of the Past was more difficult. Here's how I handled that.

Images of the Past covered two important topics: common archaeological methods as well as human prehistory discovered by archaeologists. Four clicks: arrows and textboxes appear. When I couldn't find a single textbook that had one, I ended up finding two. Two clicks: arrow shows up, then "Digging into Archaeology". "Digging Into Archaeology" covers the common archaeological methods. Two clicks: arrow shows up, then "World History" book. Then, the first several chapters of "World History: Cultures, States, and Societies (Global Remix)" cover the same period of time as "Images of the Past." These two books in combination can fulfill the same curricular role as the previous one, for no cost.

Letter Writing: Introduction

Good afternoon. I am writing to you both as a **former student of ANTH 106 [HIST 110]** and as an intern at Musselman Library. Over the past two weeks, my intern cohort has been discussing the concept of open access, especially as seen in open textbooks. **Open textbooks are cost-free for students to access and can be freely retained, reused, revised, remixed, and redistributed**. Research shows that they **increase student performance**, especially for marginalized students.

Now, with textbooks found, I turned to writing my letter. I used the same introduction for both, although with the appropriate class number. I started by reminding the professor who I was. Then I explained why I was writing and the concept of open textbooks.

Letter Writing: Out with the Old

ANTH 106

Last semester, we used two textbooks: Images of the Past and In Small Things Forgotten. Unfortunately, the **bookstore did not have an available used copy** of Images of the Past. I had to turn to the Internet to find one, and unexpectedly ended up with the International Student Version, which I am **unable to resell**. Given the extensive notes I took, I have no need to retain this textbook and would like to get back some of the $60 I paid for it, but I cannot.

HIST 110

The **most expensive book** in our class is the Twentieth Century World textbook, which costs $120 new at the bookstore. This cost is greater than the cost of all other books combined. It is also one of the **less crucial books to the curriculum**. Books like All Quiet on the Western Front and Sofia Petrovna justify their cost because they offer a contemporary perspective on major events. They are also built into the curriculum, forming our class discussions and exam questions. However, I believe that Twentieth Century World could be replaced by an open textbook **without requiring much change to how the class is run**.

Now, I explained why the two textbooks I chose needed to be replaced, for the same reasons I addressed previously.

For the ANTH letter, I use a different cost for the textbook than I did on that slide. That's because I chose to purchase it online rather than rent from the bookstore. Many students may do this to save money, but there are some risks associated with doing so. It's possible to end up with the wrong version–I had an "International Student Version". It worked for this class, but may have been a problem if the teacher was using associated online resources with the book.

Letter Writing: In with the New

ANTH 106

I have identified two textbooks that could together serve as a replacement for Images of the Past, because the book covers both common archaeological methods and early human history that has been discovered through archaeology. **Common archaeological methods** can be found in the book Digging into Archaeology, available here. **Early human history** can be found in the first four chapters of the book World History: Cultures, States, and Societies (Global Remix), available here. These books together would **cover the same material as Images of the Past at no cost**.

HIST 110

A potential candidate that I have identified is the book Western Civilization: A Concise History: Volume 3, which covers the period from the rise of Napoleon to 2017. Despite the title of "Western" civilization, increasing globalization in this period means it does **cover historical events like the Sepoy Rebellion that we have covered in class**. The book is available on Open Textbook Library here. At that link, you can find options to read the textbook as a PDF or Google Doc as well as **access reviews by other educators**. The **Creative Commons license** on this book means that if you felt some areas of the textbook needed more information or, conversely, were not important to the class, **you could make changes**.

Now I explain the matches that I've found. For ANTH, I explained why I picked two books as discussed earlier. Let's focus on the HIST side for a little bit.

First, I make the connection between the book and what we covered in class. Then, I mention the possibility of accessing reviews by other educators. Not every book will have these, but since this one did I wanted to give my professor the option to view them. I also talk about the Creative Commons license and how this could affect his choice to use the book.

Letter Writing: Call to Action

As an added **incentive**, the Johnson Center for Creative Teaching & Learning offers **stipends of up to $1000** for faculty who use open educational resources in their classrooms. I would be **happy to meet with you** to discuss this possibility more. If there are any questions I do not have answers to, I can **put you in touch** with the Scholarly Communications Department at Musselman Library.

Finally, I ended my letters with a call to action. Since my school offers incentives for OER, I made sure my professors knew about them. I emailed these letters, so since I know some people prefer verbal communication, I offered that. Finally, I let them know who they could talk to with more questions, which is Janelle here and our colleague Mary.

The other letters - 1/3

300-level English course

- Total book cost: $280.93
- Student pointed out titles in public domain
- Suggested that professor create an open text to "highlight specific passages and create a robust resource for the unique purposes of our class"

Teresa of Ávila CC0

[JANELLE]
I'm going to jump in again and talk about the letters that the other interns in the cohort wrote. They were all so different and wonderful in their own ways.

The first one I'll describe is by a senior. She didn't have to think hard about which course to target - she was an English major and one of her literature courses that semester was quite expensive. She had already used some cost-saving strategies to make the course fit into her budget, which she mentioned in her letter. You can see on the slide that the total book cost for the class was close to $300, and this was a medieval literature course. (MEDIEVAL - as in "probably not protected by copyright")

She used some of her letter to talk about public domain texts and the Internet Archive, and asked her professor to create a custom open text in the future.

I really wish she had sent the letter! I have a feeling that she didn't because this was one of her most beloved professors, and she was a graduating senior.

The other letters - 2/3

100-level Chemistry sequence

- $80-$250 book + $100 online homework system
- "Even the digital purchase of the book costs nearly $80, although it comes with multiple restrictions such as only 10 pages can be printed every 365 days."
- Inflation projections based on previous price increases
- Pointed out departmental progress while asking for more
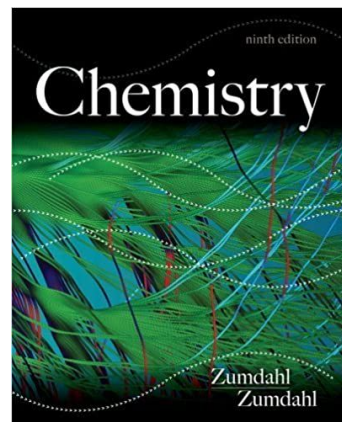
Another first-year student intern chose to target the two-semester sequence of required courses for chemistry majors.

In this case, the intern specifically advocated for a low-cost course rather than a zero-cost course. I think this is because of the online homework system, which is on the Cengage platform.

She devoted letter space to criticizing the so-called affordable book option (a digital textbook with unfriendly DRM - note the printing restrictions in the quotation on the slide). She went a step further and looked up price increases on previous editions, which averaged 12% per edition, and to project how much the cost of this particular book will continue to rise.

She acknowledged steps the department made to keep costs down, such as providing free copies of the lab manual to students, while encouraging professors to go further and adopt OER for the main textbook.

She ended by pointing out that this course sequence is required for students in 4 majors (not just chemistry) and referenced Gettysburg College's stated goal of promoting equity. It was a beautiful letter!

The other letters - 3/3

200-level Religious Studies course

- Provided 2 specific titles for potential OER adoptions
- Mentioned works in public domain
- Advocated for Khan Academy for art history content in the course

Chris Flook, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Finally, the fourth intern (a junior) selected a course in one of their majors: Religious Studies.

They suggested two open textbook titles that could serve as alternatives to the assigned textbook.

The course focused on an ancient religious tradition, so they also discussed assigned works in the public domain.

The course frequently included discussion of artworks (like the one pictured here), so they suggested using video and articles from Khan Academy. They referenced specific artworks covered in class with coverage in Khan.

In this case, the intern did not send the letter because this professor retired after the spring 2022 semester. There just didn't seem to be any point.

Now I'll turn it back over to Theo to describe some macro-level takeaways from this exercise.

The Overall Experience

- immediate vs. long-term results
- advocating while autistic
- continued plans for advocacy
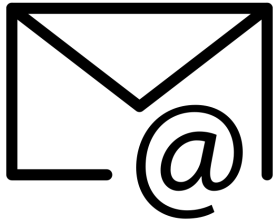
[THEO]

Unfortunately, my letters did not produce immediate results. I spoke to my history professor in person, who seemed interested in the idea of OER. However, he hasn't yet adopted them. My archaeology professor did not respond to my email. Despite the lack of immediate change, however, I am confident this project wasn't for nothing. My conversation with my history professor will hopefully lead him to be more open to some of the programs that we are planning for professors next year, which we'll get into in a bit. Also, this project has made a difference in my confidence about advocating for open and low-cost materials.

As an autistic student, I didn't think I could do some of the student activism plans we talked about during our Scholarly Communications rotation. Things like tabling are difficult for me. However, this activity led me to realize that I could use my writing to advocate. This process allowed me to better gather my thoughts before presenting them to stakeholders than an advocacy event would have. Thus, it may be a better fit for some kinds of neurodivergent students than a tabling event or collecting petitions signatures. I plan to repeat this process with professors whose classes I take in the future, as well as continuing to work with Janelle on some other projects–more on that later.
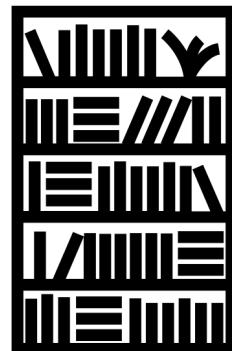
Scalability

Internship activity

Student employee activity

Grab and go activity

One-time workshop

Student advocacy group

Workshop every semester

[THEO]

At Gettysburg, this project was done on a small scale, with four interns. Student employees in Scholarly Communications departments or elsewhere in the library could also complete this project. Or, it could easily be scaled up to include more students who may not already have a working relationship with the library.

On a medium scale, this event could be done as a grab and go activity, with the worksheets available in the library along with contact information to reach out to the organizer with questions. It could also be run as a one-time workshop. If student employees already completed this activity, they may be able to assist in expanding it.

For colleges that already have students interested in OER advocacy, larger projects may be possible. This could be one of several projects conducted by a student advocacy group formed to support open textbooks. Alternatively or additionally, this could be run as a workshop once every semester. Midway through might be a good time, when students are used to their textbooks but professors could still make changes for the upcoming semester.

Repeating this activity can increase its impact. A professor who shrugs off a first letter as the opinion of one student may change their mind if presented with several letters over a period of time.

Future Plans

- Schol. Comm. Student Assistants' work in 2022-23
  - thank you campaign for faculty who use open/zero-cost materials
  - advocacy for more adoption
- Open Textbook Workshop for Faculty Fall 2022 (textbook review model from OEN)
- Holley Interns Spring 2023
- JCCTL OER Grant Spring 2023 - funding for adoption or remix

[THEO STARTS, THEN JANELLE]

[THEO]
As mentioned, this project encouraged me to continue in advocating for OER. I, along with one of my fellow Holley interns, will be serving as a student assistant for Scholarly Communications in the upcoming school year. Janelle is going to talk a little more about what that entails, as well as some of the other programs that our school will be having.

[Janelle]
My department's former student assistant graduated last spring, so we were thrilled that two of the Holley Interns expressed interest in working in our department. We are happily hiring them both. We already know they are interested in using letters of gratitude as positive reinforcement for professors using open and zero-cost materials. We are looking forward to talking with them more about what such a campaign could look like. Presumably it would involve other students. They also want to continue advocating for more OER adoptions, perhaps by using this letter-writing activity.

Our department has some other projects scheduled for this year, too. We are going to host another Open Textbook Workshop for faculty in September. This is a common model championed by the Open Education Network, in which faculty who attend a library-led presentation about open textbooks are then invited to submit a review of an open textbook they could adopt in one of their courses. If they complete a review, they get a $200 stipend. We've done this workshop before, in 2019 and 2020, and it tends

to bring new faculty into our local open education movement. It's time to do it again.

We will be hiring another cohort of Holley Interns this fall for a spring 2023 internship, and we'll likely update the Scholarly Communications rotation materials for a new group.

And with our teaching and learning center, we will offer an OER Grant in the spring. Currently we have funding for adoptions or remix projects, but we are considering expanding this grant to support zero-cost courses achieved through other strategies, like adopting zero-cost materials that aren't open.

That's what we have to share with you today!

Image References

- "Open Educational Resources - Icon" by Mary Elmquist CC BY 4.0
- "Reading" by Rajive from NounProject.com
- "Video" by 11Umbrella from NounProject.com
- "Interaction" by Liberus from NounProject.com
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- Stack Of Thick Books by Fakhri Rossi from NounProject.com
- Education by Yoteyo from NounProject.com
- Bookshelf by DPIcons from NounProject.com

Textbooks Referenced

- [In Small Things Forgotten by James Deetz](#)
- [Images of the Past by Price and Feinman](#)
- [All Quiet on the Western Front by Erich Maria Remarque](#)
- [Twentieth-Century World by Findley and Rothney](#)
- [Digging into Archaeology by Paskey and Cisneros](#)
- [World History: Cultures, States, and Societies (Global Remix) by Aaron Gulyas](#)
- [Western Civilization: A Concise History (Volume Three) by Christopher Brooks](#)

Thank you! Questions?

This presentation is available at https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/librarypubs/162

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Questions? Reach us at oer@gettysburg.edu