

## Open Pedagogy through Community-Directed, Student-led partnerships: Establishing CURE (Community-University Research Exchange) at Temple University Libraries

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### Abstract

This paper reports on the establishment of an open pedagogy initiative between community organisations and students, facilitated by the Temple University Libraries (TUL) and faculty in the Philadelphia area. The Community-University Research Exchange (CURE) produces community-driven social justice research. Library facilitators solicit research questions and project proposals from grassroots community organisations who experience social and economic marginalisation, limiting or even disallowing the access to information that is vital to innovating the services organisations provide. Students select from a bank of research projects, developed by community organisations, identifying issues that they wish to investigate, skillsets they hope to master, or organisations for whom they hope to contribute their intellectual labour. This project facilitates community organisations' direction and autonomy in promoting beneficial research objectives. It also foregrounds students as the directors of their own knowledge output and learning. This project is modeled after the Quebec Public Interest Research Group's (QPIRG) programme.

**Keywords:** Open Pedagogy, Community-Driven Research, Undergraduate Students, Community Organisations, Academic Libraries, Community-Engaged Learning

### Introduction

This paper reports on the ongoing effort to establish the inaugural cohort of an open pedagogy initiative between community organisations and students, facilitated by the Temple University Libraries (TUL) and faculty in the Philadelphia area. While this project is coordinated by Temple University Libraries, it facilitates community organisations' direction and autonomy in promoting research objectives that are beneficial to their own initiatives, projects, and strategic goals. It also foregrounds students as the directors of their own knowledge output and learning. The TUL project is modeled after the Quebec Public Interest Research Group's (QPIRG) long term programme CURE, the Community-University Research Exchange. While this paper does not explore the results of the inaugural cohort, we hope to share details of our activities in the future. This paper highlights the planning stages and development of this project as well as the underlying philosophy of CURE as it relates to libraries and the openness movement. In this article, we will outline the cornerstones of our vision for grassroots community-driven research and advocate for academic libraries' central role in this undertaking.

### *History of Openness Initiatives at Temple University Libraries*

Early discussions about openness at Temple University focused almost entirely on issues related to affordable learning materials and the adoption of open textbooks. Temple University is *the* major public university in Philadelphia and is situated in North Philadelphia with an undergraduate enrollment of just under 30 000 students. Of students from Pennsylvania, 33.6% are from Philadelphia County, a county where in 2014 over 80% of students were eligible for reduced or free lunch (PEW Charitable Trusts, 2015). In 2017, our students received over \$300 million in scholarships, grants, and self-help

which includes loans and federal work study, tuition waivers, and athletic awards to attend school (Temple University, 2018). Despite financial aid and loans, 35% of undergraduate students reported “low or very low” food security (Zalot, 2018).

It is well established within the Library and Information Studies literature, as well as in higher education circles more broadly, that textbook costs frequently pose a prohibitive burden to students and families in North America struggling to keep up with high and rising tuition costs (Hilton, Robinson, Wiley, & Ackerman, 2014). A 2018 Florida Virtual Campus survey brought attention to the United States’ national textbook crisis (Florida Virtual Campus, 2019).

To help tackle this crisis, many community colleges and universities looked toward alternatives to traditional textbooks. In order to mitigate this burden for students, the Temple University Libraries offers a grant-based initiative that awards faculty up to \$1500 for replacing costly educational resources, primarily textbooks, with materials available through the library or Open Educational Resources (OER). Over nine years, TUL’s Textbook Affordability Project (TAP) has stewarded over 85 teaching faculty in revamping their syllabi and advanced discussions around open education. These faculty represent nearly every discipline at Temple University and have saved students over one million dollars. Building upon TAP’s success, the Temple University Libraries have worked to develop a more expansive and inclusive vision for our open initiatives. As we discuss below, our existing work with this group of faculty has enabled new projects to be developed with already-mobilised stakeholders for promoting openness on campus.

### **Key interventions**

In an earlier research project of TAP participants, the authors found that most instructors were motivated by the prospect of saving students money, rather than more philosophical concepts of open knowledge. In the past year, TAP was overhauled to acknowledge instructors who created original and open learning objects for their courses. This revamping of the TAP initiative and the establishment of a steering team to address current trends and challenges related to scholarly communications, have shifted the Temple Libraries’ focus from a simple effort to make learning materials more affordable to a more holistic approach of open education and student success.

An exploration of openness as the concept that animates this project is warranted. We think of openness as a critical lens for questioning the information ecosystem and producing key interventions that collapse barriers between academia and community. Openness cannot be siloed into Open Access, Open Education, or Open Data, it is an all-inclusive ethic that considers people as whole complex beings, informing every aspect of the education and research process. One such facet of our intervention with this project is to incorporate the idea in open pedagogy that views students as engaged holistic actors with complex sets of needs and interests (hooks, 1994). Extending the work of Rajiv Jhangiani and Robin DeRosa on open pedagogy and social justice, which considers how open education can recenter learning away from what Freire called the banking model of education (one that takes a top-down approach relying simply on depositing material into a passive subject: the learner) (Jhangiani & DeRosa, 2017), we have undertaken this project to generate learning opportunities that agentivise students. Secondly, and very much intersecting with the first facet, openness means targeting the insularity of the academic institution vis-a-vis the communities where we find ourselves. Third, in response to the same trend that has commodified education and privatised scholars’ research outputs, information professionals are acutely aware and hard at work to find alternatives to the neoliberal university model. For this reason, as we explore below, the TUL CURE initiative takes advantage of existing library expertise and the role of the library in the community to

bring community-engaged research into the framework of open education. Specifically, the values of openness enable us to critically respond to the critiques of community-engaged learning.

It is worthwhile to interrogate the similarities and differences between community-driven research, such as CURE, from popular, institutionally sanctioned, top-down programmatic efforts that are widely labeled in higher education as *community-engaged learning* or *service-learning*. The National Youth Leadership Council defines service-learning as “an approach to teaching and learning in which students use academic knowledge and skills to address genuine community needs” (NYLC, n.d.). While initially aimed at responding to the rise of the neoliberal university, scholars and practitioners of community-university partnerships have themselves recognised that such initiatives have “adopted academic capitalist behaviors to make up for lost funding, manage the partnership, and balance the needs of all stakeholders” (Brackmann, 2015, p. 139). Moreover, the implementation of community-engaged learning has often reemphasized the banking model of education and fallen prey to not adequately prioritizing the needs of communities (Marullo, Moayed, & Cooke, 2009). While often maintaining ideals and rhetoric about community engagement, these initiatives have prioritized building experiences relevant for students in a competitive job market, often settled for short-term impacts in the communities where students are placed, and are sometimes established as requirements for graduation. Effectively, in practice, the community is often leveraged by the university to enhance and distinguish the campus experience for students and marketed to attract new students and donors.

Community-driven research, by contrast, emphasizes horizontal relationships with local communities in order to establish long-term, targeted and meaningful partnerships with research needs being directed by the community organisations and responding to their strategic objectives (Marullo et al., 2009; Dixon, Higgins, & Singh, 2011). Bringing the well-intentioned ideals of community-engaged learning into open pedagogy enables a more critically engaged approach to community-university partnerships, which we understand as needing to be aimed at recognizing and attending to power imbalances in these relationships. Temple University Libraries, like many academic libraries at public universities, are ideally placed to facilitate research partnerships between the community and the university for three primary reasons: (1) libraries are often the hub of openness initiatives on campuses, (2) they have existing relationships with community organisations through community-focused archival collecting areas like special collections, and programmatic and librarian commitments with the community, and (3) they serve as a vector for teaching undergraduates about the research lifecycle and information literacy.

### ***Community-University Research Exchange (CURE)***

CURE produces community-driven social justice research. In this project, the CURE team at the Temple University Libraries solicits research questions and project proposals from grassroots community organisations who experience social and economic marginalisation limiting or even disallowing the access to information that is vital to innovating the services organisations provide. Moreover, human resources, funding, and time to dedicate to undertaking research activities is another major barrier. Community-directed research questions are made available for students to browse on a dedicated webpage. Students select from a bank of research projects, identifying issues that they wish to investigate, skillsets they hope to master, or organisations for who they hope to contribute their intellectual labour. CURE enables students to choose projects that are not only appropriate to their field(s) of study, but also relate to their personal commitments or interests, and build on existing community engagements. We envision that many students participating in CURE do so for their honours thesis, independent study, or term papers - all for credit.

Once the student picks a project, the library serves as a liaison between the community organisation, student, and faculty member to construct an agreement that encapsulates the project needs as outlined by the community organisation and the project's breadth and goals as determined by the student. This process takes place in consultation with the pedagogical goals outlined by the faculty member. This agreement also serves as a rubric for evaluating the student's effectiveness in responding to the organisation's needs. In this agreement, the student can also choose a Creative Commons License best suited to their individual ideals encouraging the wide distribution of their work to the community organisation and beyond.

One way that we have modified CURE in adopting it at Temple University is by housing it within the library. Informational professionals are aptly positioned to take on CURE as we elaborate on below. Also, for the library, CURE provides an opportunity to advance and strengthen direct conversations with faculty and students on openness in the information lifecycle.

### **Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs)**

The first iteration of the CURE Programme was established in Quebec and was facilitated by the Quebec Public Interest Research Groups at Concordia and McGill Universities. Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs) are campus organisations throughout the United States and Canada conceived of during the war in Vietnam by political activist, Ralph Nader. Today PIRGS function quite differently in the United States and Canada, with the former favouring a legislatively-oriented lobbying approach and the latter opting to directly support and engage in grassroots community organising (PIRG, 2019). PIRGS in the United States are involved in the openness movement through their work with textbook affordability ("Make Textbooks Affordable": <https://studentpirgs.org/campaigns/make-textbooks-affordable/>).

Projects undertaken by Montreal university students have involved producing research to help organisations that train childcare providers add bodily consent to their core training programmes. This work involved students producing a report that became integral to incorporating this module into existing programmes. Another CURE project involved interviewing women and transfolk who had made use of shelters to help create guides providing vital information on the types of documentation required by each shelter. This project required the student to interview, transcribe, and create a resource guide for those requiring shelter services. Projects do not always take the form of traditional papers, they can range in medium from audio-visual projects, to digital humanities projects, to resource guides.

### **Establishing CURE at Temple University Libraries**

Our engagement with this project at Temple University Libraries emerged from one of the author's previous work with QPIRG McGill. In reflecting on the author's experiences, we saw an opportunity to build on the existing TUL openness projects by developing our own CURE initiative. We identified the library as a natural partner in establishing a similar programme at Temple University and in the North Philadelphia community. Given that a core component of the CURE initiative is to make information and research services more accessible to community organisations, we see the already present resources of the library as instrumental in realising the mission of CURE.

Openness is both the social and political philosophy that grounds CURE and the framework that animates its practical applications. CURE is designed as a pedagogical tool that calls upon all project stakeholders to directly grapple with components of openness in the process of reaching a consensus towards reorienting relationships between those who traditionally benefit from and those who are

exploited in producing knowledge. CURE affirms Rajiv Jhangiani's argument that "open pedagogy without respect for agency is exploitation" (Jhangiani, 2019) by recognising and purposefully seeking to rectify power disparities in the production of knowledge. CURE emphasises that communities, not lone scholars, conduct research. Oftentimes, the role of coders, librarians, archivists, students, and the labour of many others is made invisible in the production of scholarship. For this reason, it is worth noting the various stakeholders in CURE while also outlining the expertise they bring to the project.

Community organisations are central to the development of the CURE programme. Integrating community groups into CURE strongly buttresses scholarly impact statements, by grounding them in expressed community needs. Why is scholarship necessary? Whom will it impact? In what ways will it impact *them*? By focusing on these questions, the expertise of community organisations is highlighted and the individuals who work on the ground are able to amplify the specific ways their communities can benefit from exchange with the university community. In conceptualising and prioritising community organisations in this way, we are consciously addressing criticisms leveled against community-engaged learning toward community-driven research.

Information professionals' expertise is also harnessed through CURE. By serving the role of mediator and liaison between community organisations and students, librarians and archivists are also able to share their expertise in information and primary source literacy through help with conducting literature reviews, data curation and storage, archival work, and citation management. At the conclusion of the project, student participants of CURE have the opportunity to learn scholarly communication competencies by publishing their work using open access principles. Here again, librarians have the opportunity to share information to acquaint students, early in their academic career, with competencies like open journal publishing, author's rights, and types of peer review. CURE introduces students to many forms of openness including: open data, open access, and open education through the use of open pedagogical practices. Initiating conversations around various open competencies with undergraduate students may also shape their own engagements with academic publishing if they choose to pursue further studies.

Community organisations will also benefit from library expertise through workshops, support, and guidance in generating research questions that can have practical implications for the organisation's programming. At Temple University Libraries, information professionals, by establishing a community of scholars and students around textbook affordability, have already engaged in vital campus community building around open education. Harnessing this communities' enthusiasm around openness will be central in our search for faculty and student partners for our inaugural cohort for CURE.

In CURE, students are valued as producers of knowledge and their labour is recognized through self-determination. First, students get to design projects as they align with their own interests. Second, their labour is valued far beyond the limited scope of receiving a grade through a disposable assignment. Instead, contribution toward a public good is given primacy. Students also gain an opportunity to reflect and think critically about how their research should be shared, interrupting the capitalist model of the neoliberal university, and choosing to assign an appropriate Creative Commons License accordingly. Finally, CURE will create an opportunity to organize a student-led conference that is open to the public and provides students the opportunity to present their work for the university and their community.

Students and local communities are stakeholders in the openness movement who have both been recognised as being subject to structural barriers that necessitate intervention by stakeholders with greater relative power (Morales, Knowles, & Bourg, 2014). For example, through textbook affordability projects that incentivise the use of open educational resources to lower the burden of textbooks on students and their families, students are passive recipients of changing policies enacted with little of their own participation or consultation. More recently there has been a renewed focus in ways

students can create their own learning materials and be more active agents in open education. CURE recognises both students and community organisations as already being politicised, organised and connected. This project seeks to foreground the value in the work already being done by these core constituents and connect them with library and faculty input, facilitation, and support.

### ***Establishing the Programme***

The development of the CURE programme has, to date, comprised five central aims. Collectively, these have sought to accentuate and balance how best to identify and empower community organisations to drive research objectives, how to best leverage information professionals' expertise, experiences and roles on our campus, how to structure research projects to facilitate support from faculty, and how best to promote an open pedagogical approach to student participation in order to agentivise participating students. These aims include:

1. Establish a working group within the library with cross-functional expertise
  - a. The working group formed to launch CURE at TUL is purposefully made up of a variety of information professionals including our Education and Community Engagement Librarian, Coordinator of Learning and Student Success, Instructional Designer, Business Librarian, and Resident Librarian - whose work is split between special collections, archives, and library liaison duties. The roles of academic librarians and information professionals are as diverse and complementary as the various facets of academic openness. Our approach to develop our working group has sought to see the library as a holistic entity to best respond to the campus' openness needs and to engage the whole of its existing community relations.
2. Identify partner community groups
  - a. By harnessing existing ties to community organisations within the library. Even considering the significant number of charitable and activist organisations in North Philadelphia, the working group has sought to tap into the rich collaborations already present between Temple entities and community organisations. To this end, we spoke with members of the Libraries' Special Collections Resource Center to gain an understanding of how this library department has already worked with organisations in the neighborhoods around Temple University. Many of the Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) collections have been donated by community organisations, and we have sought to connect with these groups to identify potential partners. Similarly, the working group has sought to understand the collaborations taking place between faculty, particularly those who have participated in the library's existing openness projects, and organisations dedicated to community improvement.
  - b. We subsequently identified potential partner organisations by selecting a geographic area around Temple University's main campus in North Philadelphia; this area comprises 12 US postal ZIP Codes. We then examined data from the National Center for Charitable Statistics to find organisations fitting our criteria within the selected geographic area, limiting potential partner organisations to two categories in NCCS' National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities: 'Community Improvement and Capacity Building', and 'Civil Rights and Advocacy'. This method left us with 59 tax exempt entities.
  - c. Our belief is that once we establish several relationships with community organisations on this project that there will be a snowball effect as these organisations share information about the project with their partners.
3. Consider what support community organisations will need to curate research questions
  - a. Draw on librarian expertise in supporting research on campus. The Learning and Research Services division in the library is responsible for teaching at least two class sessions to

every undergraduate at Temple University. This has meant that the library has a comprehensive understanding of the approaches to information literacy and teaching about research strategies on campus. This position allows for information professionals to help accurately shape the research objectives of community organisations so that they are well-suited to the university's courses.

- b. The working group foresees a significant challenge in eliciting focused, clear, and appropriately complex research questions from participating organisations; many community entities are unfamiliar with the language and methodologies of academe. In turn, we are working to develop workshops, project materials, and consultations aimed at providing community organisations the tools to outline research objectives for themselves.
  - c. Finally, while we believe that the efforts of CURE will yield dramatic improvement to the work and mission of community partners, we also understand that support from university stakeholders will be necessary to ensure the success of CURE initiatives.
4. Identify Faculty and campus partners and classes that can promote CURE
    - a. Our public service information professionals, namely librarians and archivists already have established, protracted relationships with faculty and are able to act as key partners in identifying faculty who would be interested in collaborating with students and community organisations on CURE projects.
    - b. The library's existing work with the group of faculty invested in the Textbook Affordability Project provides an important cohort of already-mobilised stakeholders with an interest in promoting an expanded and more inclusive vision for openness initiatives on campus.
  5. Establish a web presence.

## Conclusion

This community-directed project seeks to produce mutually transformative interactions between institutions of learning and research and the communities in which they are situated. This is an outcome that often challenges existing relationships between the university and its neighbours. The project also seeks to address local ways academic libraries can tackle global problems of access to information for individuals who fall outside of the academic institution's traditional community, purposefully working to lower barriers that have typically restricted access and production of knowledge to institutions of higher education. In the interest of *openness*, CURE also seeks to reimagine traditional pedagogy, moving toward an open pedagogy where the utility of a traditional assignment is transformed toward a public good rather than solely for a grade.

In reporting on our vision for importing CURE from Montreal to Philadelphia as we are working to establish our own programme at Temple University Libraries, we hope to share our vision so that local organisations elsewhere can similarly partner with knowledge centres to establish CURE programmes of their own. We seek to partner with grassroots organisations in North Philadelphia neighborhoods to address the issues affecting our local community. The problems that the CURE initiative seeks to address, however, are in many ways universal. For example, global migrations to North America and the European Union by people fleeing political violence and the consequences of human-caused climate change is a phenomenon impacting cities throughout the United States and Europe. Similarly, the rise of right-wing populism in the West threatens the rights of the most vulnerable populations and makes the need for open knowledge and the free exchange of ideas all the more important.

This paper advocates for viewing community-engaged learning in light of the critical components of openness. This initiative is a response to the co-opting of community-engaged learning by neoliberal forces in academia that have eroded the focus of community impact, reciprocity, and

self-determination, that purportedly animated their pedagogical objectives. The guiding principles behind openness allow for the restoration of a focus on the community by challenging the increasing privatisation and corporatisation of knowledge. As we argue, the library is ideally placed to undertake this restorative work.

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