Making the Case for Open Educational Resources serves as a critical guide at a pivotal moment in American higher education. In the aftermath of the worst global pandemic in more than a century, college enrollment experienced the biggest plunge ever recorded, reaching its lowest point in a decade. Declining birthrates; burgeoning mental health issues; rising tuition; mounting student debt, including the loan burdens of 40 percent of borrowers who left college without a degree; and increased competition for international students are contributing factors.

In addition, the immediate need for post-pandemic workers led employers such as General Motors, Google, Apple, Microsoft, Accenture, Ernst & Young, Penguin Random House, and several state governments to remove the bachelor’s degree as a requirement for many jobs previously requiring one. At the same time, the proliferation of short-term credentials, certificate programs, and fast tracks to specific careers at a growing number of companies has created new forms of competition for colleges and universities.

These trends both reflect and contribute to an unraveling of the consensus that higher education—once a cornerstone of the American Dream—is a good investment. Instead, a pervasive concern is that higher education is too expensive, too difficult to access, and doesn’t teach people 21st-century skills. Indeed, according to a 2023 Gallup poll, Americans’ confidence in higher education has decreased significantly over the past several years, dropping from 57 percent in 2015, and 48 percent in 2018, to a new low point of 36 percent (Brenan, 2023). A Wall Street Journal poll taken the same year confirmed a dramatic loss of trust in higher education over the past quarter century. When asked whether a four-year college degree is “worth the cost because people have a better chance to get a good job and earn more income over a lifetime” or whether it is “not worth the cost because people often graduate without specific job skills and with a large amount of debt to pay off,” 56 percent of respondents said college is no longer worth the cost (Belkin, 2023). While these numbers are troubling in and of themselves, especially disconcerting is the sharp increase in skepticism among those who have already earned a college degree, with 42 percent in this category maintaining that their college education wasn’t worth it. Perhaps even more troubling is that the lack of confidence in higher education is strongest among those aged 18 to 34.
Disinvestment in public higher education over the past forty years and the concomitant failure of Pell grants and other forms of federal funding to keep pace with the rising and hidden costs of attending college have fueled these attitudes by catalyzing an economic and racial segregation in higher education. Indeed, a major report released by the National Center for Education Statistics at the US Department of Education in 2023 revealed that nearly 25 percent of college students face basic needs insecurity. Students at for-profit and community colleges are experiencing the highest percentages of homelessness and food insecurity, with those studying at HBCUs, tribal colleges, and other Minority-Serving Institutions also reporting higher levels than the national average (Alonso, 2023). These mounting inequities will undoubtedly be exacerbated by the recent Supreme Court rulings striking down both race-conscious college admissions and President Biden’s proposed loan forgiveness plan that would have cancelled up to $400 billion in student loans.

Thus, campus leaders inside and outside the classroom must reimagine higher education in ways that meet the equity mandate before us. Higher education’s multiple stakeholders and commitment to shared governance make change leadership different, and often more complex, than for corporations. The complexity is enhanced by the current overreach by governors, governing boards, and legislatures into tenure and promotion decisions, administrative appointments, and academic affairs, signaled by the imposition of educational gag orders around “divisive concepts” and bans on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Against this backdrop, effective change agents need evidence-based strategies to promote a change mindset and address key challenges. This publication offers a crucial tool for effectively advocating for open educational resources (OER) as a means of improving college affordability and democratizing higher education by fostering more equitable outcomes. In the process, it makes a compelling case for the pedagogical benefits of OER, detailing their multifaceted impacts on teaching and learning. I am grateful to all those who have contributed to this important work as an essential component of fulfilling AAC&U’s mission of advancing the democratic purposes of higher education by promoting equity, innovation, and excellence in liberal education.

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