

Unbound Learning: Highlights of Tennessee Open Education Survey

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The rising cost of instructional materials continues to pose a significant challenge in higher education, placing financial strain on students and potentially affecting their academic success. Open Educational Resources (OER)—freely accessible, openly licensed, and adaptable teaching materials—offer a promising strategy for reducing these costs while supporting access, innovation, and instructional flexibility. By shifting from commercial textbooks to adaptable, freely available OER, institutions can broaden access to high-quality educational content and expand learning opportunities for diverse student populations. Across the United States, colleges and universities are increasingly adopting OER to improve textbook affordability. States such as Washington, Texas, Virginia, and Colorado have documented notable success with statewide OER policies, including significant reductions in student expenses and improvements in student outcomes. Tennessee has also made progress in advancing OER as a tool for enhancing affordability, though important gaps remain. To better understand current practices and challenges, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission conducted the Tennessee Open Education Survey 2024. The survey aimed to establish a baseline understanding of textbook affordability efforts, identify barriers to OER adoption, and inform future statewide strategies for improving access to affordable instructional materials. Survey findings indicate that community colleges and public universities are leading OER adoption in Tennessee. Respondents from these institutions reported strong engagement in OER initiatives, including faculty training, support infrastructure, and student awareness—practices that may serve as valuable models for other institutions. Several institutions also reported tracking cumulative student savings and monitoring academic performance, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of OER’s impact. At the same time, institutions identified persistent challenges to OER adoption, including insufficient funding, lack of training and incentives, and other structural barriers. Despite these obstacles, the findings suggest that Tennessee’s higher education institutions have meaningful opportunities to expand OER adoption and strengthen statewide efforts to enhance affordability and access.

Introduction

Open Educational Resources (OER) are teaching, learning, and research materials—often digital—that are freely available and openly licensed, allowing users to retain, reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute content without traditional access barriers [1]. Their rapid adoption is driven by intertwined concerns about affordability, equity, and student success, particularly in public higher education systems and state colleges [2]. Systematic reviews increasingly frame OER as an “affordability solution,” noting that textbook prices have outpaced inflation and can negatively affect course enrollment, persistence, and completion [3] [4] [5].

A robust body of evidence now documents the benefits of OER. Large-scale studies at institutions such as the University of Georgia have shown that courses using OER are associated with lower DFW rates and improved outcomes, especially for Pell-eligible, part-time, and historically underserved students [6]. At the state level, several coordinated initiatives illustrate OER’s potential. Early efforts in Washington’s community and technical colleges demonstrated that strategically funded OER projects could produce high-enrollment “low-cost pathways,”

reducing textbook expenses across full degree programs [7]. Florida's OER and affordable learning initiatives, building on the Orange Grove repository, have leveraged system-wide data and legislative support to expand OER use in high-impact courses [8]. Similar state-funded OER grants in California, New York, Texas, and other states have supported zero-textbook-cost (ZTC) pathways, faculty development, and shared repositories, often reporting both substantial cost avoidance for students and increasing faculty engagement over time [9] [10] [11]. Beyond cost, faculty cite improved alignment of materials with learning outcomes, the ability to localize content, and opportunities to incorporate active and inclusive pedagogies as key instructional benefits [12] [13] [14].

Taken together, the promises of OER at the state level extend beyond "free textbooks." When coordinated through policy, funding, and cross-institutional collaboration, OER can support broader goals: increasing credential completion, narrowing equity gaps, strengthening academic freedom through adaptable content, and fostering a culture of shared, public knowledge [15] [16]. With this in mind, the Tennessee Open Education Survey 2024 was designed to capture a snapshot of the current state of textbook affordability and OER adoption in Tennessee. By focusing on current institutional practices, policies, and achievements related to OER, the survey offers insight into Tennessee's progress in supporting affordability in higher education.

Survey Design

The Tennessee Open Education Survey was developed in collaboration with THEC and various statewide stakeholders. The survey is divided into five sections and was intended to gather information in the following areas: 1) Current Affordability Policies and Programs: Examines how the institution defines OER, adoption rate of various instructional materials, and ongoing textbook affordability initiatives. 2) Institutional Use of Affordable Materials: Explores percentage of courses using OER and other inclusive access or library-provided course materials in general education, learning support, CTE, undergraduate, graduate and non-degree courses, as well as any certificates, degrees, or pathways that have no associated textbook costs. 3) Leadership and Collaboration: Describes whether institutions have dedicated roles, committees, or policies to oversee OER efforts; key contributors to OER initiatives OER awareness building programs and OER collaboration efforts with other institutions. 4) Open Educational Resource Enablers: Reviews sources of financial support, such as state funds, internal budgets, or external grants for OER, current OER training and incentive mechanisms designed to encourage faculty adoption. 5) Future Needs: Highlights potential support and strategies that may assist institutions in expanding OER adoption. In addition to predefined response options, the survey allowed participants to provide open-ended responses to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of institutional practices and challenges.

Target Audience

The survey was distributed to 82 institutions across Tennessee, encompassing the state's broad range of higher education institutions:

- 13 Community Colleges
- 11 Public Universities

- 24 Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs)
- 34 Private Institutions

Data Collection

Data collection occurred between January and April 2024. To accommodate the depth of the questions, participants were encouraged to consult multiple departments within their institutions. Responses were submitted through a secure online platform, with reminders sent to maximize participation. The survey distribution achieved a 62 percent overall response rate (n=51). Participation varied by institution types, as shown below:

- 92% of Community Colleges (12/13)
- 92% of Public Universities (10/11)
- 96% of Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT) (23/24)
- 18% of Private Colleges/Universities (6/34)

A representative from each institution, typically familiar with textbook affordability work, was invited to respond. Institutional administrators represent the largest group (57%), indicating strong participation from leadership roles. The high representation of administrators suggests that institutional leadership is engaged in their OER initiatives, which could influence policy-level decisions. OER Facilitators (18%) and library personnel (14%) were the next most common respondent groups. The strong presence of library personnel reflects their important role in OER advocacy and resource management.

Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed by institution type to identify trends, gaps, and opportunities. Results were summarized using descriptive statistics and visualizations. The high response rates among institutions allow for meaningful insights into trends across various institution types.

In interpreting these results, it is important to acknowledge the potential for response bias across institution types. While overall participation was strong, private institutions had a notably lower response rate of 18%, compared to over 90% participation among community colleges, public universities, and TCATs. This uneven representation may limit the generalizability of findings for each institution types with lower participation and could influence the extent to which the results reflect statewide practices. Future survey cycles may benefit from targeted outreach to underrepresented institution types to strengthen the reliability and completeness of statewide comparisons.

TENNESSEE'S CURRENT OER INITIATIVES

I. Instructional Materials

Across all institution types, "Print Books" remain the dominant instructional material as shown by a notably higher percentage of "Significant Use" compared to OER (Fig. 1). However, the use of OER-based course materials is gaining momentum. Community colleges reported the highest percentage of OER usage (5 out of 12 respondents reported a significant number of OER-based

courses), which could reflect a greater openness to adopting and promoting OER. Tennessee’s public universities reported “a few” OER courses. When considered alongside the volume of programs offered, the total number of OER courses could be significant. Responses from TCATs indicate minimal use of OER, and future OER adoption initiatives may consider opportunities to support TCAT participation. Private universities also indicated minimal use of OER. However, the findings from private universities should be interpreted with caution due to limited participation in the survey.

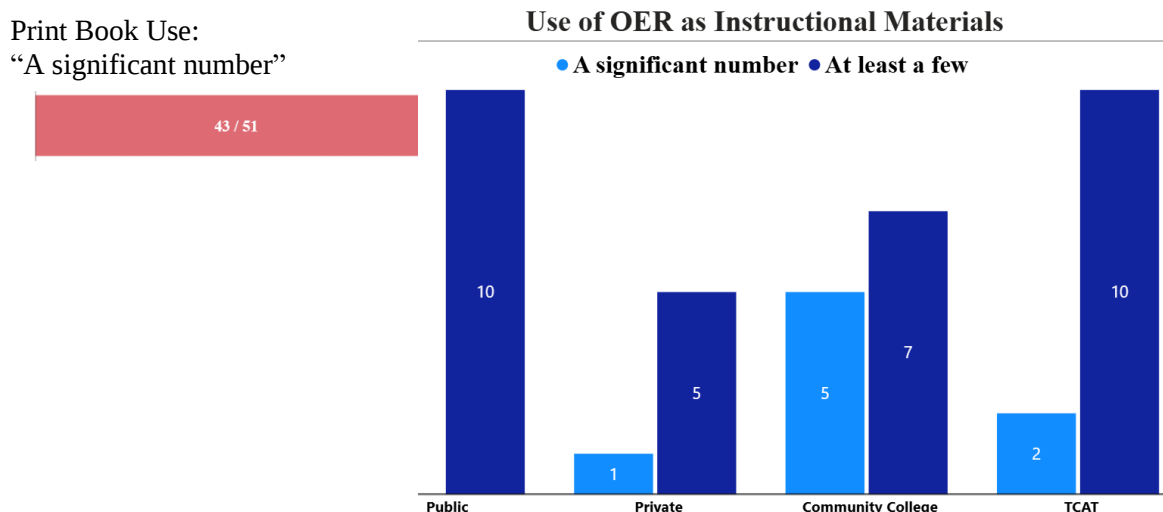


Fig. 1. Use of instructional materials

OER Key Adoption Rate

Institutions nationwide are increasingly integrating OER into courses and programs, signaling a shift toward more affordable and flexible instructional resources. Tennessee OER survey also shows similar trend. Among all course types, general education courses have the highest reported OER adoption across Tennessee institutions, with most reporting that 1–25% of their general education courses use OER (Table 1). Community colleges report the highest use of OER in

TABLE 1. OER Adoption Rate

Institution Type	General Ed Courses				CTE Courses				Undergraduate Courses				Graduate Courses	
	1-25%	26-50%	51-75%	Unsure	1-25%	26-50%	51-75%	Unsure	1-25%	26-50%	51-75%	Unsure	1-25%	Unsure
Public	60%	10%		30%				30%	80%			20%	60%	40%
Private	33%			67%				50%	33%			67%	33%	67%
Community College	68%	16%	16%		50%	8%	8%	34%	42%	34%	8%	16%		
TCAT	8%			4%	40%		4%	13%	8%			4%		

general education courses followed by public universities. TCATs report the highest use of OER in career and technical education (CTE) and professional courses. Overall, in undergraduate courses, public universities reported the highest number of OER courses, followed by community colleges. Respondents for public and private universities also reported high number of OER in their graduate programs, which may indicate growing interest in affordability strategies at the graduate level. A significant number of institutions also reported being “unsure” of their current OER adoption rate, indicating gaps in reporting structures and data collection processes. Increased institutional and external support for creating OER courses in undergraduate programs could have a broader impact by making post-secondary education more cost-effective for Tennessee students.

II. OER Funding

Seventy-five percent of community colleges that responded to the survey reported receiving significant OER funding from the state, which likely contributed to their strong engagement in OER creation across the state (Fig. 2). Conversely, public universities’ greater reliance on internal funding (50%) suggests a notable level of institutional investment in OER initiatives. Public universities also received state funding, and this balanced model of internal and external support could offer insights into effective funding strategies for OER initiatives. Private university and TCATs’ low funding across both state and internal sources highlight significant barriers to OER adoption and scaling. To foster broader OER adoption, state agencies could consider increasing funding allocations and raising awareness of existing state OER funding opportunities may help increase participation, particularly among private institutions and TCATs.

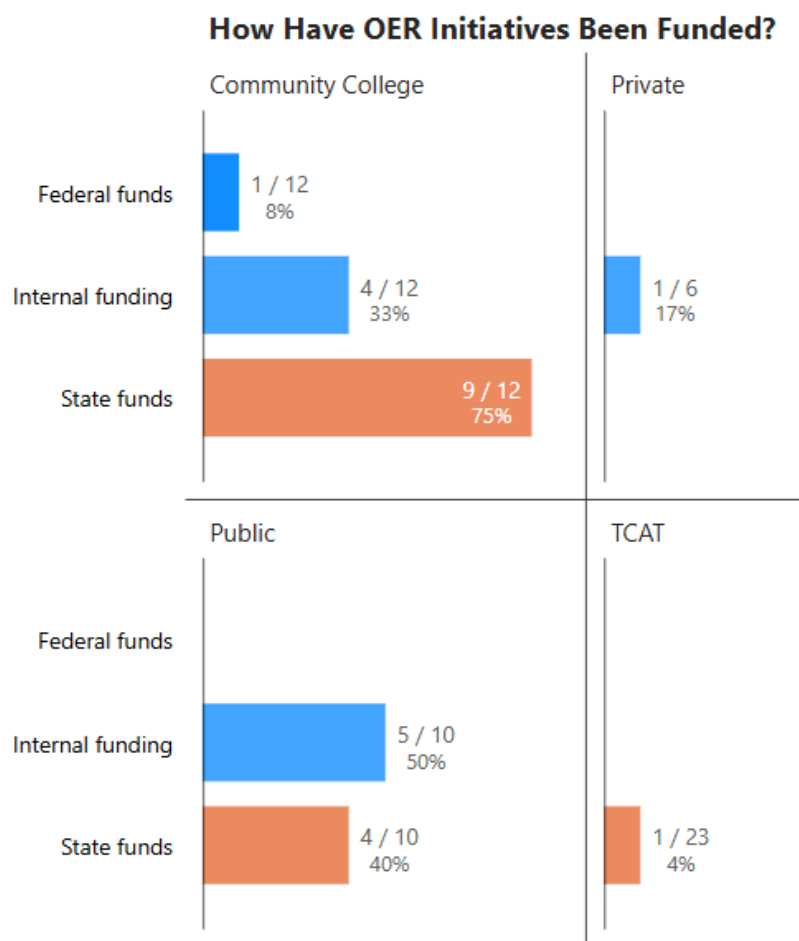


Fig. 2. OER funding sources

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

I. OER Awareness and Course Marking

OER awareness initiatives are sporadic in Tennessee institutions. While public universities reported using methods such as awareness campaigns and student advocacy, survey responses suggest these approaches may not yet achieved significant impact. Among survey respondents from community colleges, 42% reported using Banner and 33% reported using bookstore systems to designate OER courses (Fig. 3). Nearly half of responding community colleges indicated they do not have a systemic method for marking OER courses, suggesting variation in practices among institutions. Among public universities, 40% reported using bookstore systems for OER designation, while 10% reported using Banner. One-third of surveyed public universities reported not having a systemic method for designating OER courses. This lack of designation can present challenges for students to identify affordable course materials during registration. Among institutions that responded to the survey, 83% of private institutions and 83% of TCATs reported not having a method to designate OER courses. This could reduce students' ability to recognize OER materials when selecting courses. Survey responses suggest that developing systemic methods to help students identify affordable materials during registration may improve transparency and access. Consistent methods, such as course marking in student information systems like Banner or in bookstore platforms, were identified in survey responses as potentially helpful for enabling students to make informed decisions about affordable materials before enrolling.

How can Students at Your Institution Discover Which Courses Use Affordable Course Materials Before a Course Begins?

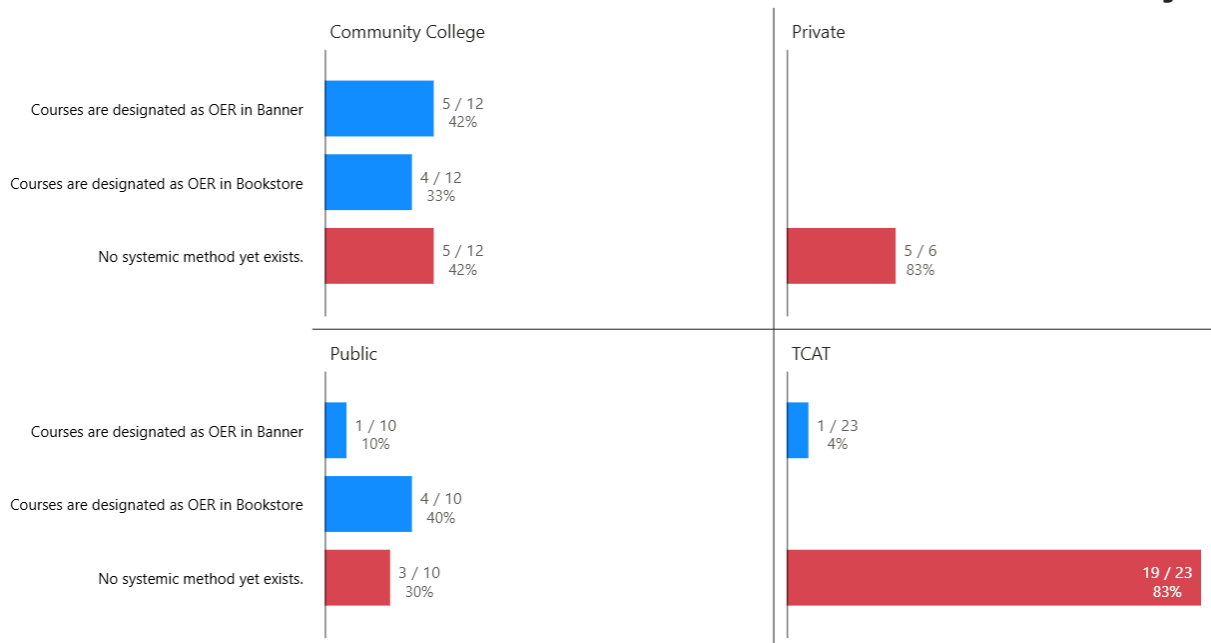


Fig. 3. OER discovery

II. OER Oversight

Among survey respondents from community colleges, 50% reported having a dedicated OER coordinator and 17% reported having an OER task force or committee. Some survey responses also described oversight structures involving faculty, library staff and/or administrators coordinated by Academic Affairs. Among responding public universities, 10% reported using a centralized oversight model and 20% reported committee-led approaches, while 30% indicated they had no centralized oversight structures. Survey responses from TCATs and private institutions indicated that OER work is often not centralized, and in some cases, no formal oversight structure is in place. Survey findings suggest that establishing roles such as OER coordinators at public and private institutions could help coordinate OER-related activities more effectively.

III. OER Faculty and Staff Training

Among survey respondents, 83% of community colleges reported some level of faculty participation in OER training (Fig. 4). Survey responses also indicated that 50% of Faculty Excellence Center staff and 33% of library staff had received OER training. Among public university respondents, 50% reported that library staff had participated in OER training, with fewer responses indicating involvement from other groups. Survey responses from TCATs and private institutions indicated lower reported levels of OER training among faculty and library staff, with TCATs reporting the fewest instances of training participation.

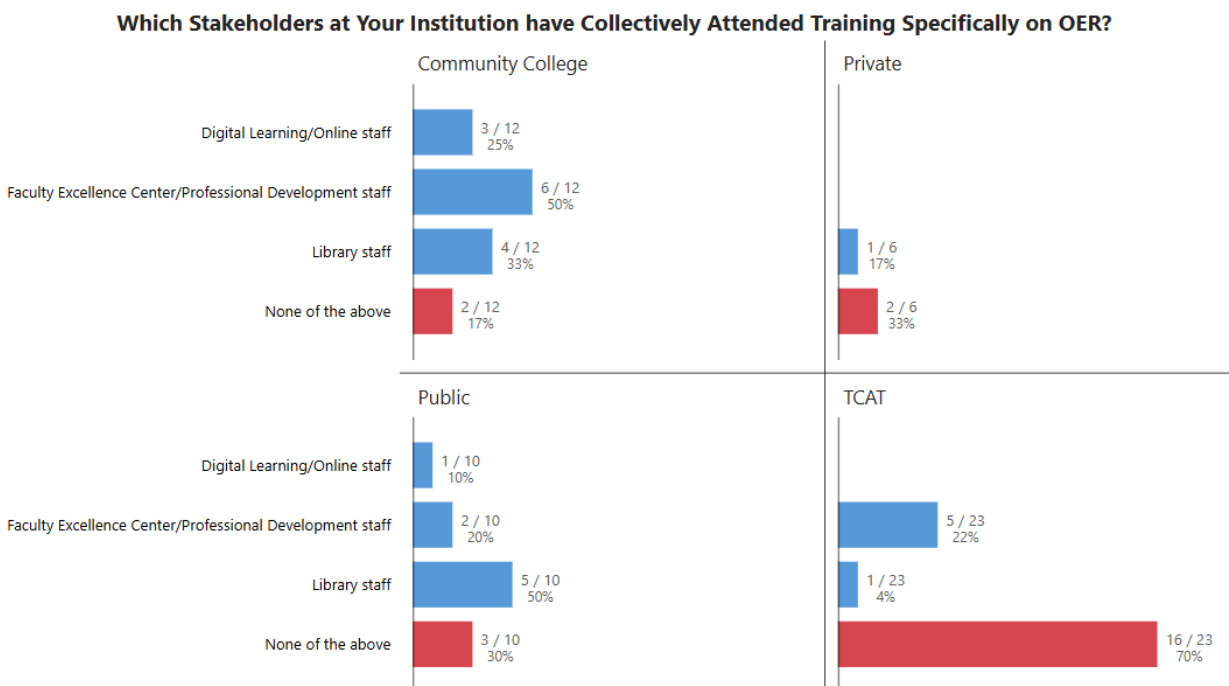


Fig. 4. OER faculty and staff training

Studies have shown that a lack of OER training and support for educators can hinder the adoption and effective use of OER, potentially affecting student learning and access [17] [18].

Survey findings suggest that expanding OER training opportunities for faculty, library staff, and other stakeholders could help institutions strengthen their OER-related efforts. Institutions might also benefit from involving digital learning and online education staff to support the transition to digital resources and the integration of OER into online learning environments.

OER NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

I. OER Faculty Incentives

Survey responses from community colleges indicated a range of faculty incentives, including stipends, tenure credit, and public recognition (Fig. 5). These reported incentives may reflect efforts to encourage faculty engagement with OER. Among public university respondents, 30% reported offering stipends, 10% reported offering tenure credit, and 20% reported offering public recognition as incentives for OER engagement. About 83% of private institutions and 96% of TCATs reported offering no faculty incentives related to OER. These findings may suggest that the absence of incentives could be a factor influencing lower levels of OER adoption in these institutions. Across all institution types, survey responses indicated that counting OER creation toward tenure requirements was among the least commonly reported incentives, though it could serve as a motivating factor for some faculty members. Offering stipends or recognizing OER creation in tenure evaluations may be strategies institutions could explore to support faculty participation. Public recognition programs could provide a low-cost approach to supporting faculty engagement, particularly for institutions with limited budgets.

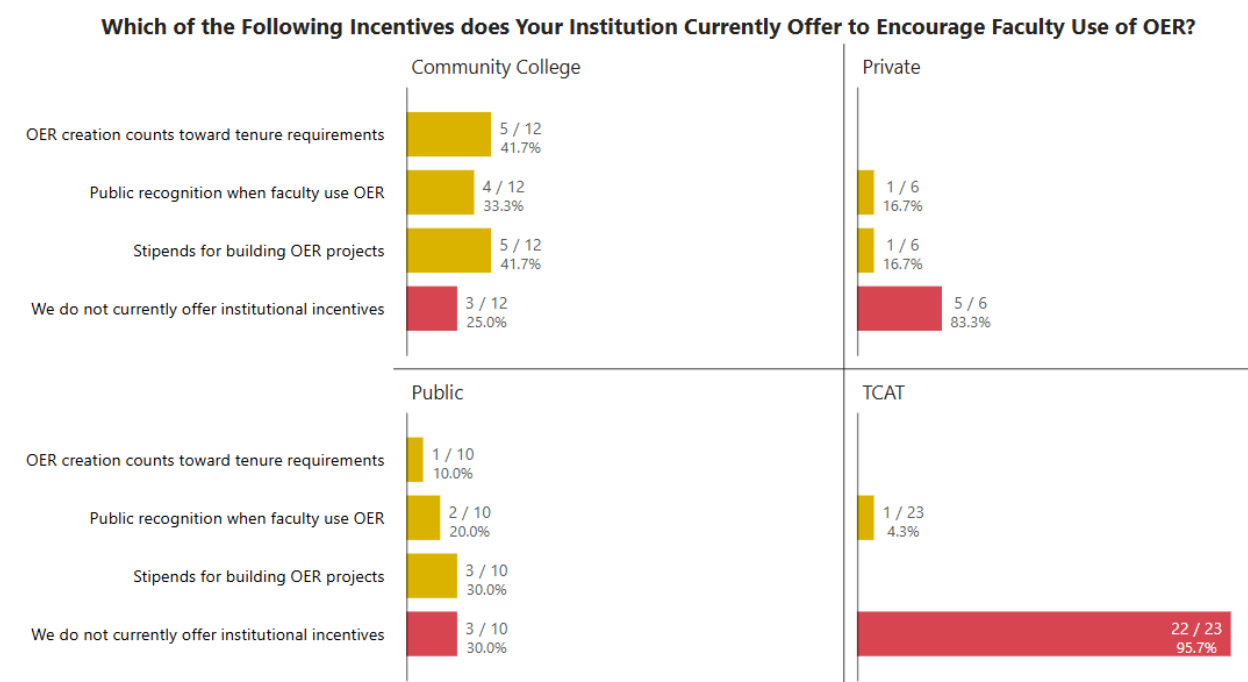


Fig. 5. OER faculty incentives

II. OER Impact Measurement

Periodic assessment of OER impacts can support institutional understanding of the relationship between OER use and student outcomes. Survey responses indicated that many institutions do not currently have a systematic method for collecting data on OER impacts.

Among survey respondents, 100% of private institutions and 83% of TCATs reported not collecting data related to OER impacts (Fig 6). Survey responses from community colleges reflected a wider range of data collection practices compared to other institutions. Approximately one-third of responding community colleges reported tracking cumulative student savings and academic performance, 25% reported tracking course pass rates, and 17% reported tracking faculty perceptions of OER materials. However, 25% of community colleges reported not collecting any OER-related data, suggesting that data collection practices vary across institutions.

Among public university respondents, 40% reported tracking cumulative student savings, while 50% reported not collecting any OER-related data. Survey findings suggest that developing shared guidelines for tracking metrics such as student savings, academic performance, and faculty perception may support more consistent OER impact measurement across institutions.

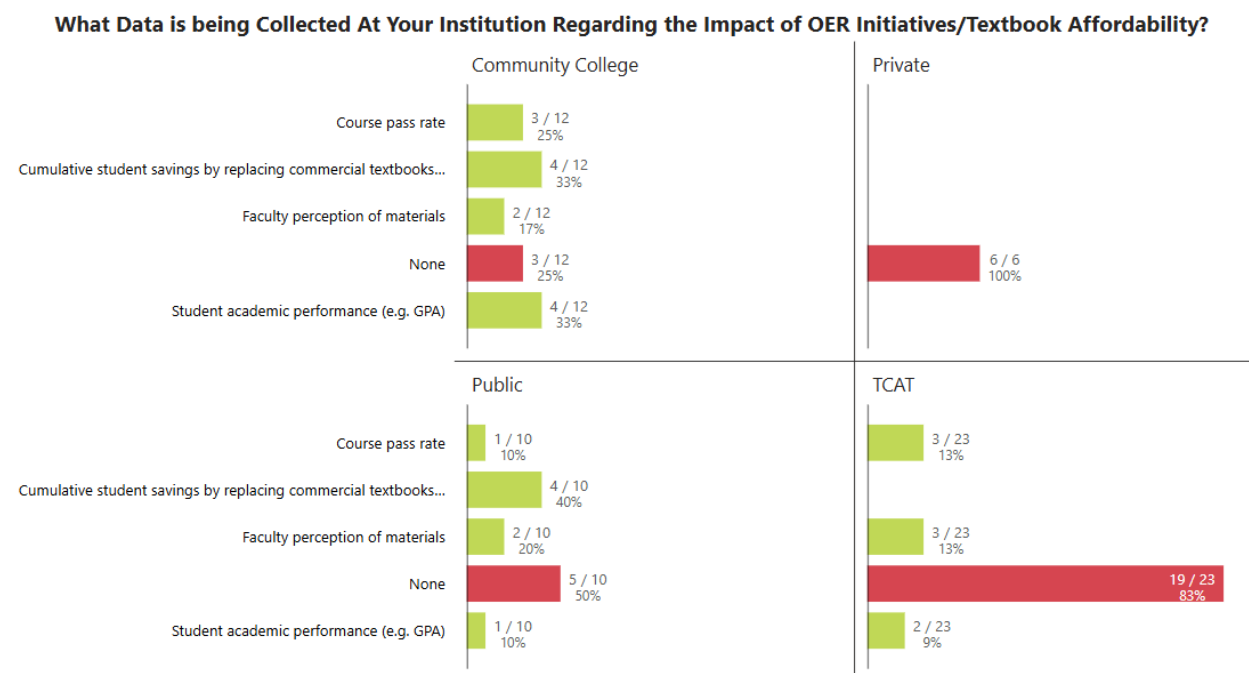


Fig. 6. OER impact measurement

III. Need of Support for OER

Survey responses identified faculty buy-in and reward-based incentives as two commonly cited factors that could encourage broader OER adoption across institution types (Fig. 7). Among respondents, 44% of TCATs identified a need for discipline-specific OER, the highest

percentage among institutions represented in the survey. In comparison, 17% of responding community colleges reported a need for discipline-specific OER, suggesting that existing resources may align more closely with their instructional areas. Survey findings suggest that incentives such as stipends, tenure credit, or public recognition could help facilitate faculty engagement with OER across institution types. These findings point to the importance of targeted support strategies. Expanding OER adoption will require both addressing gaps in available materials and creating institutional conditions that motivate and reward faculty engagement.

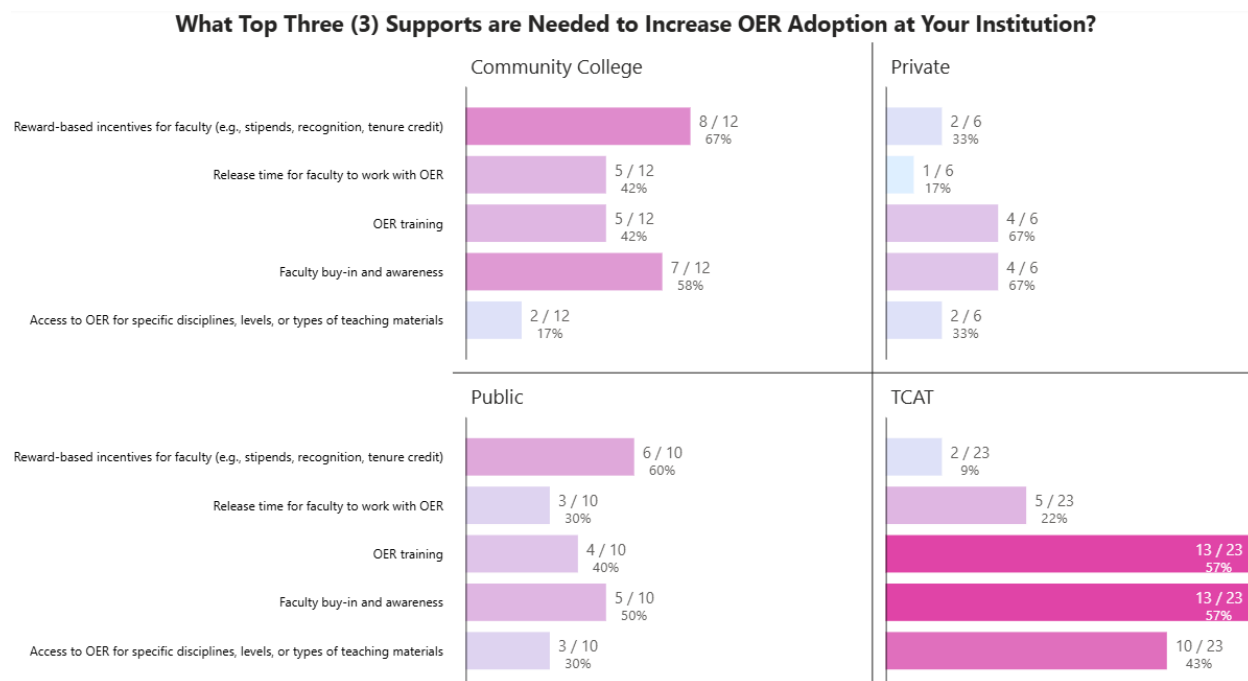


Fig. 7. Top OER support needed

Conclusions

This paper highlights the major findings of the 2024 Tennessee OER Survey. Data analysis reveal significant differences in OER adoption and support across Tennessee's higher education institutions. Community colleges reported the highest levels of OER productivity, with large OER adoption, strong faculty training, support structures, and even tracking of student savings and performance. Public universities showed progress but faced barriers such as inconsistent structures, limited training, funding shortages, and lack of incentives, highlighting areas for improvement. Private institutions reported no data collection on OER impact, suggesting the need for greater state and institutional support to build awareness and usage. Similarly, most TCATs reported no OER tracking, indicating opportunities to expand access to affordable instructional materials and integrate OER into technical education. Overall, the findings underscore both successes and gaps, pointing to targeted strategies that could strengthen OER adoption and impact across institution types.

These findings carry several practical implications for institutional leaders and policymakers. The clear differences in OER adoption, training, funding, and data collection across Tennessee institutions suggest that statewide progress will depend on coordinated support structures that address institution-specific needs. For example, the strong engagement of community colleges—reflected in high adoption rates, training participation, and tracking of student savings—demonstrates the impact of sustained funding and structured oversight. In contrast, the limited incentives, training, and data collection reported by public universities, private institutions, and TCATs highlight opportunities for targeted investment and policy development. Strengthening statewide OER infrastructure—through consistent course marking practices, faculty incentives, shared repositories, and guidance on impact measurement—could help institutions scale OER more effectively and ensure that affordability efforts reach all Tennessee learners. By aligning institutional strategies with statewide priorities, leaders can leverage OER as a mechanism to expand access, reduce costs, and support equitable student success.

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