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The Mason Libraries’ Open Educational Resources Metafinder Goes Viral

FAIRFAX, VA – March 22, 2018: Another important step in the march toward reducing the cost of textbooks for Mason students has been achieved with the national release of a new search tool by the Mason Libraries. The Mason Open Educational Resources Metafinder (MOM) greatly simplifies the discovery process for existing Open Educational Resources (OER). Created by Wally Grotophorst, Associate University Librarian for Digital Programs and Systems at Mason, the new OER Metafinder has been described by some as “the Google for Open Educational Resources.” Just a few months after its release, there are already more than 170 libraries, colleges and universities across North America linking directly to the MOM to help their faculty locate useful learning materials (https://publishing.gmu.edu/whos-using-the-mason-oer-metafinder/). Reflecting this national buzz, a recent Inside HigherEd article on the difficulty of finding OER materials recognized the Mason OER Metafinder as the “new kid on the block” that “yields more diverse results” (https://insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2018/01/10/finding-oer-remains-challenging-solutions-abound).

Prior to the release of the MOM, discovery of open educational content began with a tedious dive in and out of open educational content silos. So many different collections, wildly different interfaces, no standard metadata – any and all conspiring to drain the educator’s enthusiasm for open educational resources. The Mason OER Metafinder breaks this paradigm by simultaneously searching in real-time across sixteen different OER sites, presenting the de-duplicated and ranked results drawn from these sites in a single, modern, easy-to-understand interface. As the Metafinder's creator, Wally Grotophorst has observed, "What I keep hearing from the many colleges and universities using MOM is how it has opened up their discussions with their own faculty about the availability and quality of open resources. MOM shows in minutes results that once took hours of hit and miss searching to discover."

Making courses affordable for students is important to George Mason University - a goal shared by students and faculty alike. In fall 2016, the Student Government Senate adopted a resolution in support of open textbook adoption at Mason, encouraging faculty to consider replacing expensive textbooks with open educational resources. The following spring, the Faculty Senate endorsed the resolution, noting many "open" learning materials options are now available and encouraged Mason faculty “to consider adoption of such textbooks, when appropriate, in their course, to help students manage costs.”

The Mason Libraries has been at the forefront of efforts to reduce the cost of course materials dating back to 2014 when they launched the TextSelect program providing expensive course-required textbooks on short-term loan to students through the library’s reserves service. Extending that early success, in 2016 the Libraries’ new Mason Publishing program began
organizing workshops for faculty on OER materials and began publishing web-based guides to OER resources on the web. Mason Publishing also provides publishing support for faculty interested in developing or adapting OERs for their courses, has completed one OER textbook, and is working on additional texts.

Commenting on the success of the Mason OER Metafinder initiative, John Zenelis, Dean of Libraries and University Librarian, noted that this is “another example of how the Mason Libraries are on the forefront of higher education developments, constantly reaching for and developing solutions that benefit not only George Mason University but also contribute to the broader academic community.” He added that in the instance of OERs the Libraries are able to provide support “not only in the discovery and use realms, but also in the development and dissemination of new learning objects through the Mason Publishing program.”

Such institutional capability is critical as Mason has committed to supporting faculty and students toward more affordable educational solutions. A collaboration of Mason 4-VA program in the Provost’s Office, the Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning, and the University Libraries has completed the second year of OER competitive proposals and announced eleven faculty grant awards this spring. These grants are awarded for innovative course redesign that reconsiders materials currently used with the intent to integrate digital and open access materials. Of the endeavor, Janette Muir, Associate Provost, Academic Initiatives & Services, said “There is no question that this is an important initiative for students, faculty and the entire university, and we look forward to more programs taking advantage of this opportunity.”

An emerging crucial partnership is with the Mason Core program, enabling library staff to work with instructors to identify and embed “open” learning materials into those series of courses for Mason’s undergraduate population. Bethany Usher, Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education commented, “Students in the Mason Core general education courses are likely to be more successful when they can use less expensive and more flexible resources to study, and our faculty members can be more creative in developing their courses when they can search for class resources using the OER Metafinder.”

Another related step is the new Open Educational Resources Faculty Learning Community (OER FLC), a collaboration between the University Libraries and the Stearns Center, initiated this spring. Goals for the new OER FLC include: helping participants understand, identify, and develop Open Educational Resources (OER); providing support for participants as they share best practices on OER, including approaches to identify and use, as well as develop, OERs for the classroom. The first meeting, which took place on March 7, was well attended and received an enthusiastic response.

John Warren, Director of the Libraries’ Mason Publishing/George Mason University Press group, said “OERs are important to Mason and increasingly emphasized throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. Although textbook affordability issues for students are often the main driver for these efforts, we have also heard from our faculty that reorganizing their course to incorporate OERs has led to a more outcomes-based approach, with higher levels of student engagement and satisfaction with the materials.”
The Mason OER Metafinder may be found at https://library.gmu.edu/oermetafinder. Additional details on the Mason OER Metafinder may be found at https://publishing.gmu.edu/whos-using-the-mason-oer-metfinder/. For more information on Mason Publishing/University Libraries efforts in OERs, see also https://publishing.gmu.edu/communication/open_educational_resources/.

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