

South Louisiana Community College OER Textbooks—Better than Free



South Louisiana
Community College

As the lead instructor for a technical training program at South Louisiana Community College, Lane Gunnels was well aware that the high cost of textbooks was a big problem for the students in his program. Rather than accept the status quo, he made it his mission to solve the problem, and in doing so, found himself on an incredible journey that ultimately resulted in cost savings for his students, but also dramatically improved his student's learning experience, and his teaching experience. "I was just trying to save a buck, and ended up taking my teaching and learning to a whole new level," said Gunnels, who is currently the Lead Instructor for the Electrical Technology Program at his college.



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Lane Gunnels
Lead Instructor, Electrical Technology Program

Four years ago, concerned about reducing his student's textbook costs, Gunnels attended a professional development workshop at his college where he discovered that he could create his own interactive online lessons using a platform called SoftChalk Cloud. Intrigued by the possibilities, he quickly created five lessons for an upcoming topic, and presented them to his students as an experiment. The feedback was positive, with students responding that the lessons were "much better than the chapters they had been reading out of the required textbooks." Encouraged, he continued with lesson development and prepared lessons for two courses he was offering the following semester. This content was designed to entirely replace the previously required textbook for these courses.

In the four years that followed those initial efforts, Gunnels was able to completely eliminate the need for students to purchase a required textbooks and instead replaced that content with interactive online lessons that he created and provided

free of charge to his students. In the process, Gunnels has become a proponent of developing and sharing OER materials (Open Education Resources) as a way to not only reduce student costs, but also as a way to improve online instructional methods.

After using and developing his own online lessons for the past 4 years, and observing the results, Gunnels identified some key benefits to his methods.

A better, more streamlined learning experience for students. As Gunnels explained, in his student population it is not uncommon for students to present with poor reading skills. The lessons he developed were personalized to his audience, and written in a concise way, focusing on key concepts.

"Students seem more eager to complete reading assignments once they do not have to read chapters that can be several dozen pages long. Lengthy passages cause these students to get bogged down and lose focus."

By keeping content bite-sized, students are able to comprehend at a faster pace and complete assignments more quickly

and with improved scores. "This builds their confidence and increases their desire for knowledge," Gunnels discovered.

By eliminating the cost of the textbook, Gunnels was able to require students to purchase tool kits they need to develop the skills to become electricians. Whereas the textbook is typically not used after the course, the tool kits are. Investing in tools students can use for future years is a much better financial investment for the students, Gunnels said.

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Requiring students to access lessons online also helps students build computer skills. Even though graduates of his program may not use a computer for electrical engineering jobs, there are always aspects of the job that will need these skills, such as submitting a timesheet. In his program, "students are exposed to using a computer, tablet and smartphone on a daily basis, thus ensuring the digital world becomes comfortable and familiar to them," explained Gunnels.

The streamlined content he built gets his students into the lab earlier in his program and provides more time to develop the skills and concepts they have been reading and studying. "Students are installing more circuits and attempting more troubleshooting exercises than ever before and with greater confidence," Gunnels said. "Students in this program are now some of the most comprehensively trained people we have ever produced."

The electrical technology field is constantly changing—with new equipment and designs regularly introduced. Gunnels likes the flexibility to regularly update and modify his content, which is invaluable in keeping his program up to date.

An unexpected side benefit of this 'experiment' in building content was that Gunnels found that it sharpened his instructing skill. "I am now writing my own content and conducting a lot more research during the process. This has resulted in a greater retention of information and a refining of my delivery when lecturing or demonstrating."

Lane Gunnels



Lane Gunnels is currently the Lead Instructor for the Electrical Technology Program for South Louisiana Community College. He has been teaching higher education for ten years and believes in using innovative methods to deliver content. He is fond of saying,

"Just because the message may not change doesn't mean the delivery method cannot change." A U.S. Navy veteran, Lane took his military electrical training and experience into the classroom and has proceeded to redesign and modernize an electrician program. He has been the recipient of the SLCC "Faculty Excellence in Teaching" award and is also the first CTE instructor for SLCC to be elected the Faculty Senate President. As well as being the first 2-year term president, Lane is the first president to be elected from a campus outside of the main SLCC campus. His dedication to his students, demonstrated by his efforts towards innovation, has helped him earn these accolades.

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