Five questions for Amanda Bickel[1]

Growth in the development and use of Open Educational Resources (OER) across the CU system is creating meaningful savings for students at the four campuses. Those efforts are often energized by investment from the state via the Colorado OER Grant Program, which earlier this year awarded nearly a quarter of a million dollars in grants[2] to CU faculty.

OER supporters also can be found at the Capitol, including among the members and staff of the Joint Budget Committee (JBC). For years, Amanda Bickel, Chief Legislative Budget and Policy Analyst with the JBC Staff, has encouraged members of the General Assembly to make Colorado a leader in OER. Here, she reflects on her time at the JBC focusing on higher education and OER.

1. How did you come to be involved in OER in Colorado since the start of state funding in 2017?

My OER journey began at a family gathering in a deep conversation with a librarian, who was my first cousin's partner and who was working on OER in the State University of New York (SUNY) system. I was acutely aware of the financial barriers higher education poses for so many students, and I liked the idea of something that might help to relieve that burden.

My subsequent research indicated real cost savings for students and that faculty curating their own materials improves the teaching and learning experience. I was struck by the research indicating that students failing to obtain learning materials damaged them academically and that they would choose not to take certain classes because of materials cost.

The Joint Budget Committee took interest in my presentation of OER as a briefing issue in fall 2016, and I then arranged meetings with the Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE) and met with librarians and staff from the higher education institutions. That was the clincher. There was clearly a group of passionate people at Colorado higher education institutions already actively working on OER.

Next, the CDHE staff, the institutional representatives and I proposed a study to provide the foundation for more work ahead. It was an appealing bipartisan issue: Put in some resources and save money for students. The JBC agreed to sponsor SB 17-258, which authorized the study. The resulting report provided the basis for the JBC to launch a statewide OER initiative, and the HB 18-1331 bill was born.

The HB 18-1331 bill added a staff person in the CDHE to coordinate the OER program, retained the OER Council created by the previous bill, and created the OER grant program. Even with the 2020 pandemic fiscal crisis, we kept the program going, and renewed it for five years in SB 21-215 at the $1 million grant level, plus the council and staff position. I was very engaged with the council in the early years, but, as I'd hoped, it really took off. The energy of council representatives has kept the initiative moving forward.

The goal of the program has always been to continue nurturing OER at the institutional grassroots. I continue to hope we'll reach a tipping point when the first question a faculty member will think about when they want to design a new course is whether they can use OER for it. So, I love the way that Colorado's OER program encourages institutions to build institutional structure to support OER over the long term. Ultimately, the only way OER will become really big is when institutions, faculty and students start to think of it as a "normal" or even default choice for courses.

2. How has state funding of OER grants and programs benefited higher education students in Colorado?

To quote from the 2023 state OER report, more than 1,600 courses have been converted to OER by grantees, with 131,000 students enrolled in courses that use OER annually. There's an estimate of $31.5 million in cost savings for students over four grant cycles. Those are impressive figures, and they will only grow bigger.

As we know, once a course has been redesigned, that design is likely to stick for quite a few years, so the benefits aren't simply in the first year a course is launched but in all the years after. I have continued to encourage the

department and higher education institutions to keep beefing up the research on impacts. That's a key tool when you're trying to build more resources for a program – be it from the state legislature, private grants or within an institution.

3. What is the role of Z-degrees – those with zero cost textbooks and materials – in OER?

The Z-degree concept has really raised the profile of OER.

When a college simply has a random scattering of OER courses – no matter how wonderful those may be – it's much harder for students to take that into consideration in their financial planning. Students have to balance so many issues – their course schedules as well as course costs – so even if they would like an OER course, they might or might not be able to obtain it.

On the other hand, when they choose a Z-degree pathway, they can be confident that all their courses will fit that criterion. Just as important – perhaps more important – faculty and staff can be very intentional and thoughtful when designing OER courses. With an entire Z-degree, you've created a mechanism whereby faculty can collaborate to build a coherent educational program around materials that they have personally determined to be valuable. You've at least created the possibility for better – as well as cheaper – education.

I also think it can send an important message to other students and faculty that OER are effective and that they are popular. Certainly, it's been very exciting for me to see that there are now quite a lot of Z-degrees out there in the state: again, to quote the latest state OER report, 33% of courses at Aims Community College, 90% of GT Pathways courses at Colorado Northwestern Community College, and 85% of School of Education courses at Colorado State University.

4. Why are the Z-degree efforts at CU Denver's Math and Statistical Sciences Department especially significant?

I am so excited that CU Denver is going to launch a Z-degree in math. I'm hoping that it's rolling out this year as planned. When I started working on OER, I often heard that how to deal with problem sets was one of the big obstacles to going to OER in a field like math. But it looks like that problem is being overcome, which is huge.

5. Moving forward, OER at the JBC is assigned to Senior Budget and Policy Analyst Louellen Lowe. What reflections can you impart from your seven years of involvement with OER?

This is a really exciting program. Learn more about it and spend some time with practitioners. Folks who work on this are passionate. Try to figure out where the program should go from here. There are a lot of publishers out there that would like to sell their wares to faculty and institutions.

Because it doesn't have commercial backing, OER has to be extra scrappy to get attention. And it does take real work on the part of faculty to develop OER courses. What will it take to move OER programs to the next level and get to that tipping point?

While I will no longer be making recommendations on the higher education OER program, I now oversee many programs in the Department of Education. There's lots of interest on the part of legislators in improving the pathway between secondary and post-secondary education, and I see OER as critical to making that pathway more accessible. Legislators cannot dictate educational materials (nor should they), but I would like to figure out how we can make OER the most common tool for concurrent enrollment courses taken by high school students for college credit. I'm eager for new ideas on that.

President Saliman explores wide range of topics during visit to CU Boulder[3]
[4]

President Todd Saliman on Monday visited CU Boulder for a wide range of events and discussions with faculty, staff and student shared governance leaders, as well as top administrators from the campus.

President Saliman and other leaders from the CU system met with members of the CU Boulder Staff Council[5], representing classified and university staff, where they discussed the recent campus culture survey and the importance of knowing their work matters to the university.

The morning meeting was followed by an afternoon session with members of the Boulder Faculty Assembly[6], in which Saliman spoke about the important role that challenging conversations play in a university setting, and that a campus needs to be a safe place for those conversations to occur. He also discussed the value of a four-year degree and considered the impacts of AI on the future.

At lunch with CU Boulder Student Government[7] (CUSG) and Graduate and Professional Student Government[8] (GPSG), representatives shared their views on campus outreach strategies, housing challenges, and issues that affect graduate students different from undergraduate students.
[9]

Student orientation also was a topic of discussion for President Saliman and staff from student affairs and enrollment management. New student orientation, which had been largely online, now will offer daylong and overnight options at the campus. Recent developments include a new enrollment management plan and the establishment of a High School Advisory Board. Colorado students who apply for admission by Nov. 15 will receive notices of acceptance by Dec. 15.

Another session found the president focusing on CU Boulder's recently updated Climate Action Plan[10], which calls for a clear path to a zero-emissions target for the campus by 2050.

President Saliman also took the opportunity to explore arts offerings at the campus, receiving an overview of the new Art Buffs Collective[11], which encourages collaboration of students from any major to support on-campus creativity. The day also included a peek into a hip-hop dance class and an evening reception.
[12]

The CU Boulder visit concluded the president's current series of campus visits, which also included stops earlier this year at CU Denver[13], UCCS and the CU Anschutz Medical Campus[14].

Tune into savings: Tuition Assistance applications are open for summer 2024[15]

The University of Colorado's Tuition Assistance Benefit (TAB)[16] is your backstage pass to an affordable education, with options for faculty, staff and dependents. The summer 2024 applications are now open for all CU campuses.

Benefits-eligible faculty and staff can claim up to nine credits per academic year (fall through summer) on any CU campus. Dependent assistance options[17] vary based on the employee's home campus and the campus attended by the dependent.

TAB allows you to curate your setlist of courses to your academic aspirations, whether you're working toward a degree or just wanting to stay in a rhythm of learning. With flexible course options and term durations, the summer semester is a great opportunity to march to the beat of your own drum and set the stage for a brighter future.

Tips to remember before claiming TAB

There are a few usage rules to be aware of before you take center stage in your academic journey.

Employees who have claimed the benefit for themselves or designated it to a dependent already this academic year

should remember that once the TAB is applied to one individual's course selections, it can only be used or designated to that person for the rest of the academic year.

Summer 2024 is the final semester of the year, and you or your dependents may or may not have remaining TAB credit hours, depending on how many credits were used in the prior semesters. TAB credit hours will reset for fall 2024.

TAB eligible employees can register for undergraduate and graduate courses up to seven days in advance. Reference your campus semester calendar or first day of class start date to ensure you register in time, before you enroll in courses. Verify registration dates by visiting the Tuition Assistance benefit webpage[16]. Under **How to apply,** select the campus you're attending and click **Register for your courses** to view the campus registration dates.

Dependents claiming the TAB can follow their designated campus registration dates.

Review campus-specific policies and deadlines on the Tuition Assistance Benefit webpage[16] and the Tuitions Assistance FAQ[18] for benefit usage rules and summer 2024 deadlines by campus.

Accessing the application
Log into your employee portal[19]. Open the **CU Resources** drop-down menu and select **Forms**. Click the **Benefits** tile, then click the **Tuition Assistance Application** tile.
Deadlines

Submit your application by the campus deadlines listed below.
Denver l Anschutz — June 11 Boulder — June 15 Colorado Springs — June 18

President Saliman recaps year's highlights, looks ahead with Faculty Senate[20]

CU President Todd Saliman spoke during the April 25 meeting of the Faculty Senate[21], his second report to the governance group during this academic year.

Saliman recapped a busy period for the administration, including his appointment of new chancellors at UCCS and CU Boulder, both receiving unanimous approval from the Board of Regents. He said he also continues to honor outgoing CU Boulder Chancellor Phil DiStefano, thanking him for his "incredible dedication, leadership and commitment to the university."

The current legislative session is scheduled to conclude next week, with some CU-related bills still moving through the state legislature at the time of the meeting. A success worth noting was funding for CU and higher ed across the state.

"We started working well before the session began with other higher education institutions to come up with a funding request that would enable us all to maintain our service levels, given the current level of state funding," Saliman said. "State funding has a direct impact on each of our campuses and their ability to do what they do."

The joint funding request proved successful, with the legislature and governor ultimately approving a $107 million operating increase in funding for higher education. CU's share is $29.4 million, equal to an operating increase of 9.6%.

"It's very close to what we had requested as a group of institutions," Saliman said. "We're grateful to the legislature for approving that and to the governor," who signed the budget into law on Monday.

State funding for higher education remains relatively low compared to other states, Saliman said, though Colorado has improved in recent years.

As part of his discussion with the Faculty Senate, Saliman responded to a list of questions on several topics. In one, faculty referenced how DEI initiatives have come under attack by lawmakers in other states. "There is no indication at all that the Board of Regents would do anything to restrict our work in this space," Saliman said. "If anything, they're

asking what more can be done. The majority of the board is very, very committed to this work."

Saliman said work continues on the development of a new marketing campaign for the CU system. "I want Colorado to have a love affair with the University of Colorado."

With the systemwide strategic plan currently in place slated to conclude in 2026, Saliman said the process for developing the next strategic plan will begin in January 2025.

Saliman began and concluded his talk with an expression of gratitude to faculty.

"Thank you for what all of you and your colleagues have been doing this academic year," Saliman said. "You are the core of what we do at CU."

Public Service Loan Forgiveness processing paused through July [22]

Call for proposals: Health and Wellness Summit 2024[23]

Faculty members launch 'Inspired in Higher Ed' podcast [24]

2024 CU Denver Regents Awards ceremony [25]

CU Center for COMBAT Research and U.S. Air Force Academy form educational partnership [26]

Claw honored with Alan T. Waterman Award [27]

Han, Larson, Nozik named American Academy of Arts and Sciences members [28]

Palmer wins Cogswell Award for Inspirational Teaching [29]

CU Boulder to begin exploring 1,400 boxes of the Glenn Miller archive[30]

A rural pathway to prevent diabetes[31]

Bill to tackle credit card swipe fees could impact Colorado tourism, group warns[32]

Links
[1] https://connections.cu.edu/spotlights/five-questions-amanda-bickel[2] https://connections.cu.edu/spotlights/champions-open-educational-resources-honored-annual-awards[3] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/president-saliman-explores-wide-range-topics-during-visit-cu-boulder[4] https://connections.cu.edu/sites/default/files/glenn_-_pres_saliman_cub_visit14ga_team_table_meeting_05-02-2024.jpg[5] https://www.colorado.edu/staffcouncil/[6] https://www.colorado.edu/bfa/[7] https://www.colorado.edu/cusg/[8] https://www.colorado.edu/gpsg/[9] https://connections.cu.edu/sites/default/files/drea_-_img_2261_student_leaders_05-02-2024.jpg[10] https://www.colorado.edu/sustainability/climate-action-plan[11] https://www.colorado.edu/artsandsciences/welcome-art-buffs-collective[12] https://connections.cu.edu/sites/default/files/casey_-_saliman_visit.cc10_dance_05-02-2024.jpg[13] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/president-todd-saliman-visits-cu-denver-campus[14] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/president-saliman-s-series-campus-visits-begins-uccs-cu-anschutz[15] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/tune-savings-tuition-assistance-applications-are-open-summer-2024[16] https://www.cu.edu/employee-services/benefits-wellness/current-employee/tuition-assistance[17] https://www.cu.edu/employee-services/benefits-wellness/current-employee/tuition-assistance/dependent-options[18] https://www.cu.edu/employee-services/benefits-wellness/current-employee/tuition-assistance/faq[19] https://my.cu.edu/[20] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/president-saliman-recaps-year-s-highlights-looks-ahead-faculty-senate[21] https://www.cu.edu/faculty-senate-faculty-council[22] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/public-service-loan-forgiveness-processing-paused-through-july[23] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/call-proposals-health-and-wellness-summit-2024[24] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/faculty-members-launch-inspired-higher-ed-podcast[25] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/2024-cu-denver-regents-awards-ceremony[26] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/cu-center-combat-research-and-us-air-force-academy-form-educational-partnership[27] https://connections.cu.edu/people/claw-honored-alan-t-waterman-award[28] https://connections.cu.edu/people/han-larson-nozik-named-american-academy-arts-and-sciences-members[29] https://connections.cu.edu/people/palmer-wins-cogswell-award-inspirational-teaching[30] https://connections.cu.edu/itn/cu-boulder-begin-exploring-1400-boxes-glenn-miller-archive[31] https://connections.cu.edu/itn/rural-pathway-prevent-diabetes[32] https://connections.cu.edu/itn/bill-tackle-credit-card-swipe-fees-could-impact-colorado-tourism-group-warns