Evaluating the Success of the ZTC Initiative

2024/06/20
Prepared for VP Academic Layla Alhussainy by Department of Research and Advocacy

Context

The creation of the Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) course indicator on BearTracks was a high-profile advocacy success for the UASU VPA portfolio. It has seen increasing and widespread adoption across the University and has, conservatively, saved students millions of dollars. It has also been a significant public relations benefit to the University; for example, see this article in The Quad. Based on UASU and University data and comparable programs, this overview aims to briefly assess the extent to which the ZTC course indicator can be considered successful.

Strategic and Policy Alignment

Government of Alberta

- *Alberta 2030: Building Skills for Jobs Strategy*: "Support the expansion of Open Educational Resources, such as course materials and textbooks." The ZTC indicator program launched concurrently with Alberta 2030 and can be noted as a sign of progress toward this objective.

University of Alberta

- *Igniting Purpose: Student Experience Action Plan*: "Develop and take actions to increase the affordability of class materials, including aiming to increase textbook affordability by having 35% of courses and class sections use the Zero Textbook Cost initiative by 2026." Key Indicator: "Percentage of courses and class sections using the Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) initiative."
- *Teaching, Learning and Evaluation Policy Suite — Appendix B: Multifaceted Evaluation of Teaching and Learning*: "...varied, cost-effective resources aligned (e.g. Open Educational Resources or Zero Textbook Cost designation)..."

Key Stats

- 32.8% of Winter 2024 courses were ZTC (source)
- ZTC courses have saved students up to $30 million over three years (source)
- In a December 2023 survey (n=2,668), 14% of Fall 2023 students had picked a course because it was listed as ZTC, rising to 15% of women, 20% of non-binary students, 16% of international students, 19% of disabled students, 19% of Indigenous students, and 21% of students who had visited a food bank in the past year (source, source)

Comparators

The University of Alberta flags ZTCs at the course level. This is a relatively rare and new development in Canada, and typically driven by student advocacy and student union effort. For example, SMUSA maintains a [list](#) of ZTC courses at Saint Mary's, UWSA does the same in [partnership](#) with the University of Winnipeg, and CBU SU does the [same](#) in [partnership](#) with Cape Breton University. The University of Alberta's integration of this sort of list into the course selection system is a distinctive success.

Many institutions have seen success creating entire credentials out of ZTC courses, including universities in the California State and Colorado State systems, CUNY, Kwantlen Polytechnic, Penn State, and several colleges in British Columbia. California has seen [widespread investments](#) in ZTC courses and pathways at the college level over the past decade. For example, a pilot program was estimated to save up to $42 million across three years at 19 California colleges, while the University of Alberta's program has saved up to $30 million across three years.

SWOT Analysis

	HELPFUL	HARMFUL
INTERNAL	- Eager and rising uptake from instructors (⅓ of class sections). - Buy-in from RO, Libraries, UASU, GSA. - Well received in governance. - Indicator already built by IST. - Simple to perpetuate (reminder/invitation emails to instructors). - Aligned with SEAP. - Included in TLEP suite; can contribute to instructor advancement. - Impacting course selection for thousands of students, especially equity-seeking groups.	- Course indicator would need to be rebuilt when BearTracks is eventually replaced. - Actual financial impact can't be calculated; 'up to' is the best these programs can do. - Low-profile: impact is not obviously visible without repeated public reminders.
EXTERNAL	- Aligned with AB2030 goals and can support relevant provincial asks in coming years. - BearTracks integration makes U of A a leader.	- Threat of automatic textbook billing models ('[inclusive/equitable access](#)').[1] - Based on rising textbook costs, rising cost of living, YouTube, free online academic resources, ChatGPT, etc., students are tending to see less value in textbooks.

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[1] Under such models, while instructors would retain the freedom to select Open Educational Resources, students would still be billed the (large) fees involved just as if instructors had not selected OER, unless the students were able to opt out in time. This may make instructors less likely to feel that selecting OER is a meaningful way to help make education affordable, damaging progress toward strategic goals.