



MINNESOTA STATE

January 31, 2024

Z-Degrees Report to the Legislature

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Executive Summary

Z-degrees: Continuing build on the foundation for growth and sustainability

Almost a decade ago, as rising costs increasingly made textbooks unaffordable for students, Minnesota State began exploring an emerging alternative: Open Educational Resources (OER), openly licensed or commonly licensed materials that faculty could make available to students at no cost.

As a first step, Minnesota State partnered with the University of Minnesota's Open Education Network, which, along with other efforts, helped introduce faculty to OER possibilities. As interest grew, Central Lakes College became the first college to launch a zero-cost textbook program.

Thanks to funding and support from the Minnesota Legislature, Minnesota State has been able to accelerate its efforts and increase its impact:

- In the 2023 academic year, savings to students reached **\$2.2 million**.
- The savings to 85,514 students since inception totals **\$8.5 million**.
- **Ten colleges** now offer Z-degrees, which means students can complete an associate degree with zero textbook costs.
- The initiative is **helping close the equity gap** for students of color, first-generation students, and students who receive Pell grants. Those categories of students took at least one Z-degree course at a slightly higher percentage than a comparable group of students.

Minnesota State colleges that offer a Z-degree

- Anoka-Ramsey Community College
- Central Lakes College
- Century College
- Lake Superior College
- Minneapolis College
- Minnesota North College
- Minnesota State Community and Technical College
- Minnesota West Community and Technical College
- Northland Community and Technical College
- St. Cloud Technical and Community College

System-wide Support

To support the movement of Z-degrees forward, Minnesota State has developed system-wide support for faculty and staff as they tackle the challenges of finding zero-cost textbooks, materials, and resources for courses. Supported by both Legislative and system funds, they include the following initiatives:

- Network for Educational Development. Under this umbrella, Minnesota State offers webinars and short courses for faculty and staff by faculty and staff, including a wide variety of courses around OER, as well as learning circles where faculty and staff share best practices.
- An OER faculty coordinator who facilitates learning circles and helps faculty with adopting, adapting, or creating open education materials.
- An OER librarian (half-time position) who works with faculty throughout the system to find OER and other options for textbooks and materials.
- Access to an e-platform where colleges and universities can tap e-books.
- Financial support for creative commons certification course, which helps faculty who want to generate their own OER materials, and librarians who wish to support OER development.
- A repository for faculty to upload the OER materials they create.

In addition, with support from its Board of Trustees, Minnesota State received a grant from the federal government that funds a pilot project to create open textbooks and OER resources for teacher education courses. This project not only benefits Minnesota State students financially, but the textbooks and OER resources that result from the project offer the potential to help students across the country.

In bringing Z-degrees to life, faculty, staff, and administrators continue to learn and adapt. For example, sometimes faculty may not find what they need in the open resource world. Minnesota State librarians are helping counter that situation by using e-platforms or purchasing e-books with grant money. To make course resources truly affordable, Minnesota State needs to make the path to zero-cost materials as wide as possible.

In spite of the past and remaining challenges, the work offers many rewards. Students tell faculty and staff how much they appreciate no-cost textbooks and materials and how much of a difference saving that money means to them and to their education. Many faculty who transformed their course materials also like the flexibility and the ways OER can help enhance the classroom experience.

This report includes two case studies of colleges, helping demonstrate the impact on students and faculty. None of these successes – and other such successes – would be possible without the Legislature’s interest and funding. Future financial support ensures that Minnesota State can continue to develop and expand Z-degree opportunities, and, even more critically, sustain the initiative. Minnesota State administrators, faculty, and staff all appreciate the Legislative commitment to student success.

Grant Support

Funds help jump-start efforts throughout the system

The Funding Spark: 2019-2020

The Minnesota Legislature allocated \$500,000 in funding for at least three Minnesota State colleges to offer Z-degrees by the 2020-2021 academic year (AY). Minnesota State awarded \$250,000 in each AY to faculty for creating, adopting, or adapting OER textbooks for courses supporting a Z-degree. Based on strong campus interest in pursuing Z-degrees, Minnesota State offered a total of \$390,000 in matching funds from the Academic and Student Affairs (ASA) division in AY 2020, \$175,000 in AY 2021, \$150,000 in AY 2023.

Colleges submitted a grant application to participate in the Z-degree project. Minnesota State evaluated applications on the following criteria:

- The readiness of campus personnel
- Structural readiness
- Cultural readiness
- Current open/zero-cost textbook inventory
- Proposed Z-degree and course sequence

Large-Grant Awards

Minnesota State awarded the following colleges large-grant awards of \$100,000 each to fund and support college completion of a Z-degree:

- Anoka-Ramsey Community College*
- Century College
- Lake Superior College*
- Mesabi Range College* (now Minnesota North College)
- Minneapolis College
- Northland Community and Technical College

** Funded through legislative appropriations. The remaining three colleges were funded by the Academic and Student Affairs (ASA) Educational Development and Technology unit.*

Small-Grant Awards

Funding did not allow for all colleges that applied to receive a large grant award. Because Minnesota State wanted to ensure that remaining colleges maintain momentum in working toward Z-degrees, it allocated four small-grant awards.

The following colleges received small-grant awards of \$10,000 each to continue foundational work toward a Z-degree:

- Central Lakes College
- Hibbing Community College (now Minnesota North College)
- Inver Hills Community College
- Minnesota West Community and Technical College



Case Study: Minnesota State Community and Technical College

Excitement for Expansion

In 2023, Minnesota State Community and Technical College (M State) made headlines and radio and TV airwaves as a result of its investment in Z-degrees. With campuses in Detroit Lakes, Fergus Falls, Moorhead, and Wadena, the college attracted media mentions for work to expand its Z-degrees.

There's a good reason for the attention: M State received a \$100,000 grant from Minnesota State to support the development of Z-degrees for the college's Psychology Transfer Pathway program and its Associate of Applied Science in Business. M State currently offers its two-year Associate of Arts-Liberal Arts and Sciences as a Z-degree. M State also was chosen to participate in the 2023-2024 American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Institute on Open Educational Resources.

The funding, administrative leadership, and evolution of open educational resources (OER) help bring renewed energy to an initiative that makes college more affordable and accessible to students, says Marsha Weber, Dean of Extended Learning and the School of Business and Information Technology.

"OER or zero cost isn't what it was five to 10 years ago," says Weber. "There are many high-quality materials and available resources for faculty, for students, for the college to be successful at this," Weber continues, "we're excited about the resurgence of this at M State."

M State dedicated part of a faculty in-service day to share OER updates and opportunities and talk through challenges. M State also launched the *Explore OER* initiative where faculty receive a stipend to delve into an OER website and tutorial and to review two potential resources for their courses.

Faculty members appreciate the flexibility OER offers, says Alicia Carley, Dean for the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences. "The beauty of OER is that you can really customize your course to use appropriate materials and make the course your own. I think faculty really like and enjoy the creativity of that."

In 2024, M State will tap system-level resources and resources from the AAC&U Institute, which brings expert consultants together with local campus teams for frequent virtual events, meetings, and mentorships.



Cont'd: Minnesota State Community and Technical College: *Excitement for Expansion*

The college plans to continue offering faculty training opportunities and will look at mentoring possibilities for faculty who want to create their own OER content, as well as continue pursuing funding to keep the momentum going. Challenges to overcome include faculty retirements and turnover, courses that rely on simulations and other supplies where there are limited or no no-cost options, and development of more course offerings that qualify for Z-degree pathways.

“We feel like we’re on the right track with it because we are engaging more faculty than we have in the past,” says Carley. “The energy and interest are there.”

Grants for Different Phases: 2020-2021

Minnesota State granted several different types of awards to help colleges make progress, whether they were considering Z-degrees or looking to expand existing ones.

Z-degree Exploration Awards

The following colleges received \$25,000 each to assess campus readiness and culture to ensure future success in implementing a Z-degree:

- Minnesota West Community and Technical College
- Saint Paul College

Z-degree Implementation Awards

The following colleges received \$100,000 each to fund and support college completion of a Z-degree by AY 2023:

- Minnesota State Community and Technical College
- St. Cloud Technical and Community College
- Hibbing Community College (now Minnesota North College)



Z-degree Expansion Awards

Minnesota State awarded grants of \$25,000 per campus for the following colleges with a Z-degree that wanted to add courses or course sections to an existing Z-degree:

- Century College
- Lake Superior College
- Minnesota North College (formerly Mesabi Range College)
- Northland Community and Technical College

Increasing Interest: 2021-2022

Minnesota State awards its first grant to a university and continues to see Z-degree implementation and expansion.

Z-degree Exploration Awards

Inver Hills Community College and St. Cloud State University received \$25,000 each to assess campus readiness and culture to ensure future success in implementing a Z-degree.

Z-degree Implementation Awards

Minnesota West Community and Technical College received \$100,000 to fund and support completion of a Z-degree by AY 2024.

Z-degree Expansion Awards

St. Cloud Technical and Community College received \$25,000 to add courses and course sections to an existing Z-degree.



Case Study: Century College

Z-degrees, results, and more

When Century College asked students about the impact of their participation in Z-degree courses, the answers were clear: by saving money on textbooks, some students were able to take more classes, while others required less financial aid or applied the savings to necessities, such as rent.

Another analysis also revealed that Z-degree courses may help keep students in the classroom.

The college compared the pass rates of students who enrolled in Z-degree courses between fall 2021 and fall 2022 to other sections of the same course without the designation. The preliminary data showed a 2.8 percent higher pass rate for Z-degree courses.

“The benefits to students are real,” says Eric Riedel, Dean for Health Sciences and Continuing Education and Customized Training. “I don’t think I have seen a more cost-effective initiative in meeting college goals.”

The college’s Z-degree efforts align well with two main Century College strategic goals. “Our institution is dedicated to creating a culture that recognizes and develops the whole person by building an infrastructure to identify the needs of students,” says Michelle Schoenecker, Director of the Center for Professional Development and Collaboration. “In addition, zero cost and low-cost courses assist us in improving accessibility and outcomes by adopting equitable practices. This goes to the institution’s strategic goal to create a culture of inclusion, diversity, equity, and action.”

Century received a grant in 2019 to launch its Z-degree initiative and started encouraging faculty to transform their textbooks and materials by using zero-cost open educational resources (OER) and other options. Currently, students can complete an Associate of Arts (AA) Liberal Arts and Sciences degree and the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum package without the additional cost of textbooks. In spring 2024, Century College plans to offer 115 no-cost courses for students.

An early adopter, English faculty Kelly Donahue embraced the transformation, changing her first course to OER in two weeks, and spreading the word and helping others to do the same. “I’ll never go back,” says Donahue.



Cont'd: Century College Z-degrees, results, and more

Textbook cost savings is only one of the reasons behind Donahue's enthusiasm for Z-degree courses. OER and other online resources improve accessibility for students. The online platform at Century College will translate materials into more than 70 languages and allow students to download materials for reading or listening. Instead of assigning an entire textbook, faculty can link chapters to modules and find a combination of resources that helps improve instruction. "Free is great, but then it's realizing the other advantages," she says.

For faculty, support is key to finding OER resources or other no-cost options. At Century College, they can work with Caroline Toscano, instructional designer, who tracks Z-degree course materials and shares those resources with faculty. Librarian Randi Madisen also helps faculty leverage OER resources and uncover other ways to offer no-cost materials, such as purchasing e-books.

Madisen splits her time between her position at Century College and her new part-time responsibilities as OER librarian for the Minnesota State system. In that role, she looks at ways to sustain the Z-degree initiative throughout Minnesota State, such as new resources, continued sharing for all campuses, ongoing support for faculty, and identification of long-term needs.

"Faculty are doing a lot of great work," says Riedel. "Sometimes it's just creating the pathway for them to continue doing that work and providing support."

Momentum: 2022-2024

More colleges and universities express an interest in Z-degrees, as implementation and expansion also continue.

Z-degree Exploration Awards

The following colleges and universities received \$25,000 each to assess campus readiness and culture to ensure future success in implementing a Z-degree:

- Bemidji State University



- Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College
- Minnesota State University Moorhead
- Rochester Community and Technical College

Z-degree Implementation Awards

The following colleges received \$100,000 each to fund and support college completion of a Z-degree by academic year 2025:

- Minnesota State Community and Technical College
- Normandale Community College

Z-degree Expansion Awards

Minnesota State awarded grants of \$25,000 per campus for the following colleges with a Z-degree that wanted to add courses or course sections to an existing Z-degree:

- Century College
- Minnesota North College (formerly Hibbing Community College, Itasca Community College, Mesabi Range Community College, Rainy River Community College, and Vermillion Community College)
- Minnesota West Community and Technical College

More Investments: 2024-2026

In the next few years, Minnesota State looks to both sustain the gains it has made and continue to expand the Z-degree initiative, as well as to encourage college faculty to develop zero-cost textbooks for courses in high-demand fields that will transfer to universities. Minnesota State is currently accepting grant applications that will support these efforts.

Conclusion

Z-Degrees: Results and more

Minnesota State continues to expand the Z-degree offerings of its colleges. The 2023 academic year marked a record 10 colleges with Z-degrees, a way for students to earn an associate degree without paying textbook costs. Faculty continue to work on converting their traditional course materials to no-cost materials, and colleges with one Z-degree have started work to offer another.

As a result, the return on investment continues to grow and multiply. In the 2023 academic year, savings to students reached \$2.2 million. The savings to 85,514 students since inception totals \$8.5 million (see [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#)).

The initiative also is helping close the equity gap for students of color, first-generation students, and students who receive Pell grants. Those categories of students took at least one Z-degree course at a slightly higher percentage than a comparable group of students (see [Table 3](#)).

At the system level, Minnesota State offers professional development support, including learning circles that give faculty members a place to share best practices, opportunities, and challenges with one another.

One exciting new frontier for Z-degrees involves targeting courses in fields whose credits will easily transfer to universities. Legislative support will help defer the costs in bringing faculty together to determine potential zero-cost textbooks and materials for those courses and to implement them in those courses throughout the system.

With an eye to the future, Minnesota State also knows the importance of work to sustain and grow its successes and values the contributions of the Minnesota Legislature in supporting ongoing efforts.

Learn More

Learn more about Minnesota State OER initiatives at MinnState.edu/OER, including [Z-degree projects](#).

More information about the student, faculty, and administration perspectives on Z-degrees can be viewed in the [Minnesota State Z-degree project video](#).



[Watch the Z-Degree Video](#)

References

See tables below for:

- [Institution Summary](#) (Table 1)
- [Total Z-degree Cost Savings](#) (Table 2)
- [Equity 2030 and Affordability](#) (Table 3)

Table 1: Institution Summary

Academic Years 2020-2024 (through summer and fall). Minnesota State continues to expand Z-degree offerings through the support of the Minnesota State Legislature. Following are the actual savings of campuses implementing and expanding Z-degree offerings.

Institutions	AY21				AY22				AY23				AY24 through Summer/Fall 2023			
	Courses Converted	Sections Offered	Students Enrolled	Savings	Unduplicated Courses	Sections Offered	Students Enrolled	Savings	Unduplicated courses	Sections Offered	Students Enrolled	Savings	Unduplicated Courses	Sections Offered	Students Enrolled	Savings
Total	642	1,181	23,851	\$2,385,200	605	1,167	23,574	\$2,357,320	499	1,128	22,446	\$2,244,600	362	756	15,643	\$1,564,300
Anoka-Ramsey Community College	75	172	4,226	\$422,600	46	109	2,566	\$256,000	26	53	1,181	\$118,100	41	88	2,136	\$213,600
Central Lakes College	177	252	4,799	\$479,900	185	304	5,281	\$528,100	132	195	3,677	\$367,700	62	80	1,566	\$156,600
Century College*	70	128	2,132	\$213,200	48	142	2,745	\$274,500	68	157	3,305	\$330,500	53	113	2,715	\$271,500
Lake Superior College	100	181	3,718	\$371,800	72	152	3,416	\$341,600	80	205	4,636	\$463,600	55	105	2,287	\$228,700
Minneapolis Community and Technical College*	65	199	4,388	\$438,900	43	137	2,819	\$281,900	38	118	2,429	\$242,900	35	113	2,372	\$237,200
**Minnesota North College (formerly Hibbing Community College and Mesabi Range College)	43	56	1,144	\$114,400	91	80	1,452	\$145,200	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Minnesota State Community and Technical College	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	73	216	3,871	387,100	57	135	2,344	\$234,400
Minnesota West Community and Technical College	50	79	1,356	\$135,600	31	67	1,142	\$114,420	9	17	332	33,200	33	75	1,348	\$134,800
Northland Community & Technical College*	69	114	2,088	\$208,800	53	147	2,474	\$247,700	42	122	1,987	198,700	22	43	797	\$79,700
St. Cloud Technical & Community College	NA	NA	NA	NA	36	78	1,679	\$167,900	31	45	1,028	102,800	4	4	78	\$7,800

Table 1: Total cost saving impact on all courses using zero-cost course resources for AY21-23, and summer/fall semester of AY24 (actual). Please note that the methodology of determining the courses converted to Z-degrees, the number of sections offered, and the students enrolled has been updated since the February 2022 report. In that report a mix of self-reporting and acquiring data from the Minnesota State student information system (SIS) was utilized. Beginning with the March 2023 report, Minnesota State is using its SIS as the sole source of truth for Textbook Cost Level. This data, which began being collected in January 2020, tracks whether a course offers an Open Educational Resource (OER), a No-Cost Textbook, or a Zero-Cost Textbook. For this report, as with prior reports, average textbook cost savings are calculated at \$100 per course per student enrolled. Using the SIS data provides more consistent and auditable reporting.

* Funding was provided by Minnesota State system office, not from state Z-degree legislature allocations

**With the merger of Hibbing Community College (HCC), Mesabi Range College (MRC), Itasca College, Rainy River College, and Vermillion Community College in May 2022, the data regarding courses converted, sections offered, students enrolled, and cost savings for HCC and MRC's Z-degree have been combined. For AY23, Minnesota North College has not yet begun specifying whether a course is using OER, a No-Cost Textbook, or a Zero-Cost Textbook, and whether the course supports a Z-degree. We anticipate that this data will become available in the future as Minnesota North College fully completes the merger.

Table 2: Total Z-degree Cost Savings

Minnesota State continues to expand Z-degree offerings through the support of the Minnesota State Legislature.

	Combined AY21, AY22, AY23 and AY24 (summer & Fall)			
	Unduplicated Course	Sections Offered	Students Enrolled	Savings
Total	2,115	4,281	85,514	\$8,551,400
Anoka-Ramsey Community College	188	422	10,109	\$1,010,900
Central Lakes College	556	831	15,323	\$1,532,300
Century College*	239	540	10,897	\$1,089,700
Lake Superior College	307	643	14,057	\$1,405,700
Minneapolis Community and Technical College**	181	567	12,008	\$1,200,800
Minnesota North College (formerly Hibbing Community College and Mesabi Range College)**	134	136	2,596	\$259,600
Minnesota State Community and Technical College	130	351	6,215	\$621,500
Minnesota West Community and Technical College	123	238	4,178	\$417,800
Northland Community and Technical College*	186	426	7,346	\$734,600
St. Cloud Technical and Community College*	71	127	2,785	\$278,500

Table 2: Total cost saving impact on all courses using zero-cost course resources for colleges offering Z-degree for AY21, AY22, AY23 and summer/fall semester of AY24 (actual)

* Funding was provided by the Minnesota State system office, not from state Z-degree legislature allocations. **With the merger of Hibbing Community College (HCC), Mesabi Range College (MRC), as well as with Itasca College, Rainy River College, and Vermillion Community College in May 2022, the data regarding courses converted, sections offered, students enrolled, and cost savings for HCC and MRC's Z-degree have been combined. For AY23, Minnesota North's total does not include summer/fall semester of AY23 specifying whether a course is using Open Educational Resource, a No-Cost Textbook, or a Zero-Cost Textbook, and whether the course supports a Z-degree. We anticipate that this data will become available in the future as Minnesota North fully completes the merger.



Table 3: Equity 2030 and Affordability

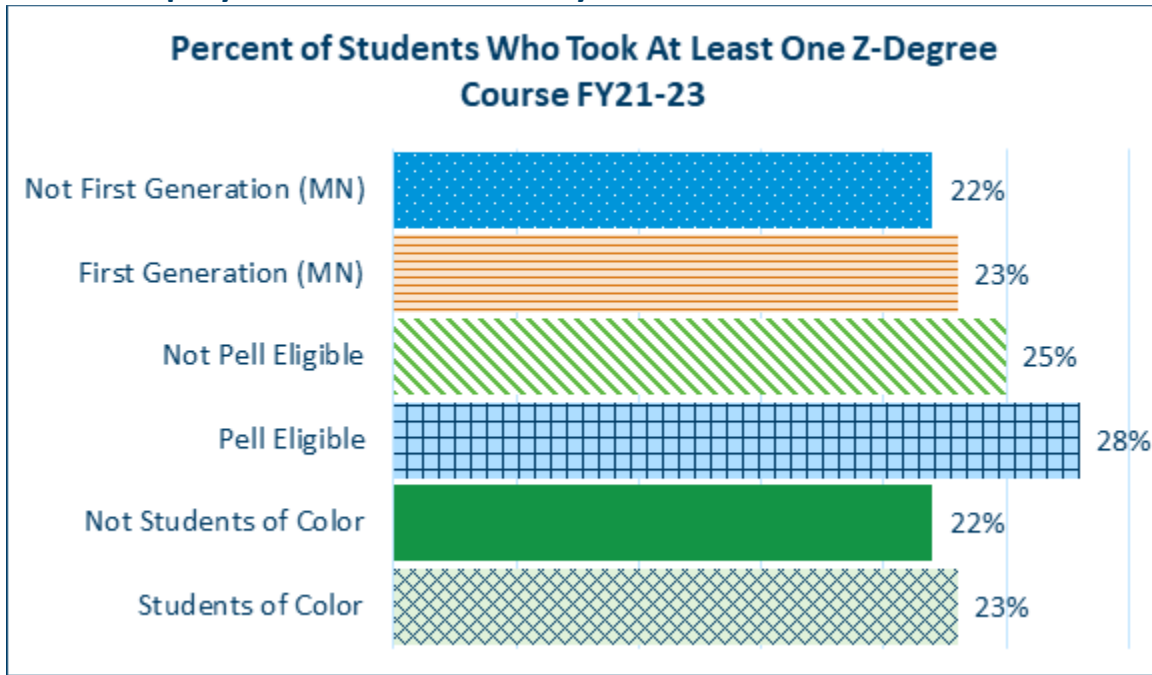


Table 3: Comparison of students taking at least one Z-Degree course FY21 – FY23 between students of color and not students of color, Pell eligible and not Pell eligible, and first generation student and not first generation student.