



January 24, 2025

Z-Degree Report to the Legislature

MINNESOTA STATE



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Executive Summary

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

Over ten years 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 2024 academic year, the annual savings to students reached **\$3.1 million**.
- Since the inception of Z-degrees at Minnesota State, the savings to over **126,000** students totals **\$12.6 million**.
- **Ten colleges** offer Z-degrees, which allow students to complete an associate degree with zero textbook costs.
- The initiative is **impacting 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 & Technical College
- Northland Community & Technical College
- St. Cloud Technical and Community College



Systemwide Support

To provide the infrastructure to nurture and grow the Z-degree initiative, Minnesota State has developed systemwide support for faculty and staff as they address the challenges of finding zero-cost textbooks, materials, and resources for courses. Supported by both Legislative and system funds, they include the following initiatives:

- x Network for Educational Development (NED). 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 develop OER development knowledge and skills and share best practices. In the 2024 academic year, the NED offered 100 webinars and 39 short courses which were attended by 1,100 faculty and staff.
- x An OER faculty coordinator who facilitates learning circles and helps faculty with adopting, adapting, or creating open education materials.
- x An OER librarian (half-time position) who works with faculty throughout the system to find OER and other options for textbooks and materials.
- x A Pressbooks support and training librarian (half-time position). Pressbooks is an online publishing platform that allows faculty and staff to create, adapt and share digital books. It allows authors to easily remix sources, localize materials, publish collaboratively in various formats, and increase student engagement using interactives like social annotation and H5P objects, like quizzes or games.
- x Access to an e-platform where colleges and universities can tap e-books and other no-dan-aw&n)-2 (r)han J0 Tc (m)lnr thae(0 Td(0 Tc 0 Tw ()Tj0.wa)55c -0.003 Tww(s)6 a)2(t)6.1 (u)tlf



In moving the Z-degree initiatives forward, faculty, staff, and administrators continue to learn and adapt. For example, some faculty may not find what they need in the open resource world. Minnesota State librarians help by using e-platforms or purchasing e-books with grant money. To make course resources truly affordable, Minnesota State has widened the path to zero-cost materials.

Although there have and will continue to be challenges to implementing an initiative of this scope and scale, the impact of the work is substantial. Students tell faculty, staff, and administrators how much they appreciate no-cost textbooks and materials and how much of a difference the savings means to them and to their education. Many faculty who transformed their course materials appreciate the flexibility and the control over content that allows OER to enhance the classroom experience.

The [Z-Degree Report for Fall 2024](#) provides profiles of the 10 campuses which have implemented Z-degrees, as well as additional information about the Z-degree and other Minnesota State OER initiatives. None of these campuses' successes – and other such successes – would be possible without the Legislature's endorsement and funding. Future financial support ensures that Minnesota State can continue to develop and expand Z-degree opportunities, and, 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 & Technical College



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, implementing a Z-degree on their campus, or looking to expand existing ones.



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

Z-degree Expansion Awards

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

Momentum: 2022-2024

More colleges and universities expressed an interest in Z-degrees, as implementation and expansion continued.

Z-degree Exploration Awards

During this period, 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

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

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Z-degree Expansion Awards

In spring 2024, Minnesota State modified the amount available to campuses for expanding their Z-degrees from \$25,000 to up to \$50,000. Discussions with campuses indicated that for campuses to maintain and grow their Z-degrees, greater flexibility in the amount awarded needed to be provided. Those colleges with a Z-degree that wanted to add courses, course sections, or provide no-cost resources to their students were:

- Century College
- Lake Superior College
- Minnesota State Community and Technical College
- Northland Community & Technical College]
- St. Cloud Technical & Community College

Looking forward, Minnesota State is planning to leverage 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. In December 2024, Minnesota State issued a call for



Conclusion

Z-Degrees: Continue results and more

Minnesota State continues to expand the Z-degree offerings of its colleges. The 2024 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 2024 academic year, annual savings to students exceeded \$3.1 million. The savings to 126,642 students since inception of the Z-degree initiative totals \$12.6 million (see [Table 1](#)



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](#).



References

See tables below for:

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

Z-Degree Campus Highlights

[Z-Degree Report – Fall 2024](#)

Table 1: Institution Summary

Academic Years 2020-2025 (through summer and fall). Minnesota State continues to expand Z-degree offerings through the support of the Minnesota State legislature. Following are the calculated student savings of campuses implementing and expanding Z-degree offerings.

Table 1:



