

The Revolution Starts Now: Embracing the Disruption of ZTC Pathways

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The revolution is coming, and it will be disrupting textbooks at your campus. You've likely heard discussions about OER and ZTC, possibly noticing markers next to courses in your

college catalog. You might have even been asked to create an OER or ZTC pathway for your college. If you have been sitting on the sidelines, clinging to your textbooks and hoping to avoid the next wave of disruption at your campus, now is the time to start exploring and perhaps embrace this revolution before becoming the rotary phone in this digital age.

Before diving into the nuances of OER and ZTC, let's clarify these acronyms.

"OER" stands for "open educational resources." These are freely accessible, openly licensed educational materials that can be used for teaching, learning, and research. OER can include a variety of resources such as textbooks, lecture notes, videos, quizzes, and more. The key characteristic of OER is their open licensing, meaning that users have the permission to freely use, adapt, and share the materials.

The open licenses associated with OER allow educators to customize and tailor the content to better suit their specific teaching needs. This approach promotes collaboration and the sharing of knowledge, making education more accessible and affordable.

"ZTC" refers to "zero textbook cost" programs. These programs focus on using educational resources, including textbooks and course

materials, that are freely available and openly licensed as OER. The goal is to reduce or eliminate the cost of textbooks for students.

What are ZTC degrees? In essence, "zero-textbook-cost degrees" pertain to community college associate degrees or career technical education certificates earned exclusively through courses that eradicate conventional textbook costs, employing alternative instructional materials and methodologies, including open educational resources. Printing instructional materials at the discretion of students is not considered a cost under this program (California Education Code – EDC Section 78052).

The California Community Colleges actively advocate ZTC pathways for degrees and certificates, recognizing their significance, especially for traditionally marginalized populations and at-risk populations. ZTC is vital to retaining the students. Why? ZTC pathways contribute to creating a more inclusive and cost-effective educational environment, allowing students to focus on their studies without the financial burden of expensive textbooks.

Here are six reasons you might want to look more deeply into this for your classroom, or at least learn about the potential benefits for your department.

- 1. Financial Savings:** Of course, one of the primary benefits is cost savings. Traditional textbooks are typically pricey to the average student, and the cumulative cost of course materials can add a significant financial burden. This burden frequently deters at-risk and low-income populations from enrolling in courses or pursuing degree pathways with elevated textbook costs. ZTC pathways aim to eliminate these costs, making education more affordable.
- 2. Increased Access:** The objective in creating an entire general education (GE) pathway or degree pathway that is fully ZTC is to ensure universal access for all students. This is achieved by incorporating ZTC courses at each juncture along the pathway, easing students from the financial burden of textbook costs. Instructors creating a

ZTC course often use OER materials, which are freely accessible and openly licensed. This implies that students can access course materials without restrictions, promoting greater equity and access to educational resources. Furthermore, forward-thinking departments are creating OER for their courses and/or involve students in creating OER resources for their class, which has the added benefit of giving students a publishing credit.

- 3. Customization and Adaptability:** Instructors who are not yet aboard the ZTC initiative should note that OER utilized in ZTC pathways are typically accessible under open licenses. These licenses allow educators to personalize and modify the content to align with their teaching preferences. Essentially, this process involves decentralizing the idea of a copyrighted textbook into an adaptable resource catering to the needs of the community. The flexibility empowers instructors to tailor materials better suited to meet the specific requirements of their courses and students.
- 4. Collaboration and Sharing:** The creation of the ZTC pathway is designed to encourage sharing educational resources among educators, not only within a single college but throughout an entire discipline. The collaborative effort allows educators to create a common ZTC knowledge base for a specific class. This approach can lead to development of high-quality, peer-reviewed materials with the potential to benefit a broader audience, fostering a sense of community in education. Moreover, if students are encouraged to partake in the creation, the process can truly embody equity in learning by removing hierarchies in the classrooms.
- 5. Digital Accessibility:** While community colleges embrace distance learning, hybrid, and hybrid learning, accessibility for all students continues to be a flashpoint for instructors. The benefit of OER used in ZTC pathways is that it is available in digital formats, making them easily accessible to students with various learning preferences. Digital materials offer the universal benefit

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of being accessed anywhere with an internet connection, providing convenience and flexibility. Tangible resources, such as textbooks, pose potential accessibility problems for students who cannot easily access the material to meet their unique needs.

6. Encourages Innovation: Finally, and probably most importantly, ZTC pathways encourage educators to explore innovative and effective teaching methods on a wider platform. Requiring students to purchase a printed textbook may limit adaptability to varied learning needs or contexts within your class. ZTC options offer flexibility allowing instructors to modify and tailor resources, empowering them to experiment with innovative approaches in real time. These resources, developed by a community of scholars,

not only encourage dynamic teaching methods but also adhere to accessibility requirements. In fact, these collaborations enable OER and ZTC faculty to create and share some innovative strategies to fit the evolving needs of students.

Ultimately, the world of ZTC pathways offers educators a chance to create vibrancy in their discipline, fostering living texts that adapt to the needs of individual students. This not only enhances the learning experience but also responds to the requirements of at-risk and traditionally marginalized student populations. Take the first step and contact your OER or ZTC coordinator to become a part of this educational revolution. It just might be our most promising avenue as educators for keeping our disciplines not only current, but also relevant. ■