



MINNESOTA STATE

January 24, 2025

Z-Degree Report to the Legislature

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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:

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- Access to an e-platform where colleges and universities can tap e-books and other no-cost resources.
- Financial support for creative commons certification courses, 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 for teacher education courses. This project not only benefits Minnesota State students financially, but the textbooks and OER materials that result from the project offer the potential to help students across the country.



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

** 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 & 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

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 & 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 & 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 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 & Technical College

Increasing Interest: 2021-2022

Minnesota State awarded 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 & 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:

- Minnesota State Community and Technical College
- Normandale Community College



Z-degree Expansion Awards

Minnesota State also awarded grants of \$25,000 per campus for the following colleges 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 Vermilion Community College)
- Minnesota West Community & Technical College

Continued Investments: 2024-2026

Z-degree Exploration Awards

In spring 2024, the following colleges and universities received up to \$25,000 each to assess campus readiness and culture to ensure future success in implementing a Z-degree:

- Alexandria Technical & Community College
- Dakota County Technical College
- Minnesota State College Southeast
- South Central College
- Northwest Technical College
- Minnesota State University, Mankato

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 2026:

- Inver Hills Community College
- Minnesota State University, Mankato (Spanish)
- Minnesota State University Moorhead
- Rochester Community and Technical College
- Saint Cloud State University

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 grant applications that will continue to support these efforts. Those who are awarded implementation grants will be launching their Z-degree in AY27.

In addition, Minnesota State is developing an initiative to provide Z-degree transfer pathways (Z-TP). The first Z-TP being explored will provide a zero-textbook cost business degree with OER course development, anticipated to begin in fall 2025.

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](#) 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 continues to offer and evolve professional development support, including learning circles, short courses, and webinars 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 is helping to 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)

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.

Institutions	AY 2020-2021				AY 2021-2022				AY 2022-2023				AY 2023-2024				Summer and Fall 2024 ¹			
	Courses Converted	Sections Offered	Students Enrolled	Savings	Unduplicated Courses ²	Sections Offered	Students Enrolled	Savings	Unduplicated Courses ²	Sections Offered	Students Enrolled	Savings	Unduplicated Courses ²	Sections Offered	Students Enrolled	Savings	Unduplicated Courses ²	Sections Offered	Students Enrolled	Savings
Total	649	1181	23,851	\$2,385,200	616	1,273	24,394	\$2,439,400	521	1,151	22,657	\$2,265,700	595	1,537	31,437	\$3,143,700	519	1,078	24,303	\$2,430,300
Anoka-Ramsey Community College	75	172	4,226	\$422,600	46	106	2,566	\$256,600	26	53	1,181	\$118,100	59	170	4,229	\$422,900	58	127	2,940	\$294,000
Central Lakes College	177	252	4,799	\$479,900	185	303	5,278	\$527,800	132	195	3,677	\$367,700	123	189	3,607	\$360,700	74	106	2,543	\$254,300
Century College ³	70	128	2,132	\$213,200	48	141	2,743	\$274,300	68	157	3,305	\$330,500	80	205	4,735	\$473,500	57	136	3,371	\$337,100
Hennepin Technical College	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	1	1	20	\$2,000
Lake Superior College	100	181	3,718	\$371,800	72	152	3,416	\$341,600	80	205	4,636	\$463,600	81	197	4,220	\$422,000	51	101	2,297	\$229,700
Minneapolis Community and Technical College	65	199	4,388	\$438,900	43	137	2,819	\$281,900	38	118	2,429	\$242,900	36	113	2,367	\$236,700	35	109	2,333	\$233,300
Minnesota North College (established FY2023) ⁴	43	56	1,144	\$114,400	NA	NA	NA	NA	1	1	11	\$1,100	1	1	37	\$3,700	NA	NA	NA	NA
NHED Hibbing Community College (pre-FY2023)	NA	NA	NA	NA	48	59	742	\$74,200	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
NHED Mesabi Range College (pre-FY2023)	NA	NA	NA	NA	43	78	1,452	\$145,200	NA	NA	NA	NA	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	68	229	3,955	\$395,500	66	153	3,090	\$309,000
Minnesota West Community and Technical College	50	79	1,356	\$135,600	31	66	1,142	\$114,200	9	17	332	\$33,200	53	136	2,342	\$234,200	31	72	1,430	\$143,000
Normandale Community College	NA	NA	NA	NA	10	10	88	\$8,800	18	19	173	\$17,300	4	4	40	\$4,000	59	95	2,291	\$229,100
North Hennepin Community College	NA	NA	NA	NA	1	1	12	\$1,200	3	3	27	\$2,700	1	1	9	\$900	NA	NA	NA	NA
Northland Community and Technical College	69	114	2,088	\$208,800	53	143	2,475	\$247,500	42	122	1,987	\$198,700	31	82	1,510	\$151,000	21	38	747	\$74,700
Saint Paul College	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	45	193	4,026	\$402,600	29	82	1,911	\$191,100
St. Cloud Technical and Community College	NA	NA	NA	NA	36	77	1,661	\$166,100	31	45	1,028	\$102,800	13	17	360	\$36,000	37	58	1,330	\$133,000

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 for all colleges that use course markings whether a course offers a No-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.

¹Fall 2024 data are preliminary. Final data will be available in February 2025.

² Courses (subject and course number) unduplicated by institution for each fiscal year.

³ Funding was provided by the Minnesota State system office, not from state Z-degree legislature allocations.

⁴ 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 a No-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 Legislature.

Combined AY21, AY22, AY23, AY24, and AY25 (summer & Fall)				
	Unduplicated Course	Sections Offered	Students Enrolled	Savings
Total	2,895	6,220	126,642	\$12,664,200
Anoka-Ramsey Community College	264	628	15,142	\$1,514,200
Central Lakes College	691	1,045	19,904	\$1,990,400
Century College*	323	767	16,286	\$1,628,600
Hennepin Technical College	1	1	20	\$2,000
Lake Superior College	384	836	18,287	\$1,828,700
Minneapolis Community and Technical College	217	676	14,336	\$1,433,600
Minnesota North College (established FY2023)**	45	58	1,192	\$119,200
NHED Hibbing Community College (pre-FY2023)	48	59	742	\$74,200
NHED Mesabi Range College (pre-FY2023)	43	78	1,452	\$145,200
Minnesota State Community and Technical College	207	598	10,916	\$1,091,600
Minnesota West Community and Technical College	174	370	6,602	\$660,200
Normandale Community College	91	128	2,592	\$259,200
North Hennepin Community College	u	5	48	\$4,800
Northland Community and Technical College	216	499	8,807	\$880,700
Saint Paul College	74	275	5,937	\$593,700
St. Cloud Technical and Community College	117	197	4,379	\$437,900

Table 2: Total cost saving impact on all courses using zero-cost course resources for colleges offering Z-degree for AY21, AY22, AY23, AY24 and summer/fall semester of AY25 (actual).

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



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***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 a No-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: Z-Degrees and Equity 2030

Percent of Students who Took at Least One Z-Degree Course
FY21-FY24

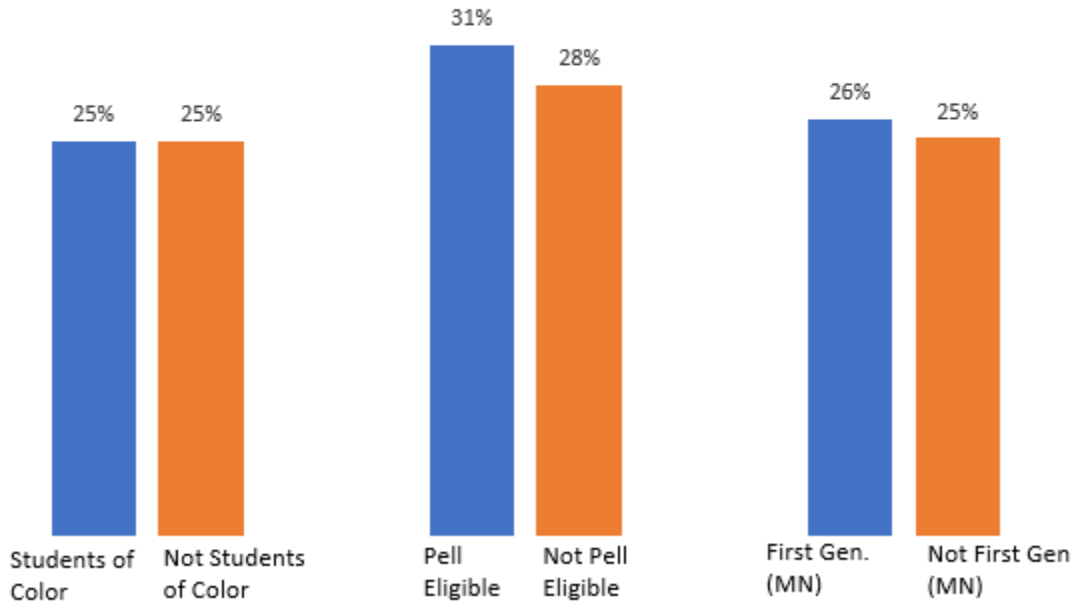


Table 3: Comparison of students taking at least one Z-Degree course FY21 – FY24 between students of color and not students of color, Pell eligible and not Pell eligible students, and first-generation students and not first-generation students.