



COSUMNES RIVER COLLEGE

OFFICE OF RESEARCH & EQUITY

Fall 2022 Zero Textbook Cost Focus Groups

Report authored Fall 2022

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Summary of Findings

In Fall 2022, the Office of Research & Equity worked with the CRC Open Educational Resources (OER)/ Zero Textbook Costs (ZTC) Project Lead to design and implement focus groups in order to hear about students' experiences with ZTC at the college. In total, eight CRC students with experience in zero to four ZTC courses participated in six interviews and/or focus groups. Students participating in the focus groups were at different stages of their journey at CRC and had various levels of experience in ZTC courses. While some students were first-year students, others were returning to their studies after several years, having started at CRC before ZTC courses were offered.

The focus groups revealed five major findings:

1. Textbook costs have a bearing on student enrollment decisions
2. Students spend extra time and energy at the beginning of the semester finding cheaper textbook solutions
3. Students say that cost savings in ZTC courses could help them with other expenses
4. Students experience issues with the textbook system beyond just cost
5. Students feel that ZTC courses are a positive solution to issues surrounding textbooks

Overall, the students who participated in the ZTC focus groups expressed overwhelming support for ZTC courses. Even those students who said they like to have a hard copy of course materials said that they prefer the ZTC course system. Based on these findings, in combination with internal research that found that courses with higher textbook costs in Fall 2021 had significantly more pre-census drops during the first weeks of the semester (Meinz, 2022), the Office of Research & Equity recommends that CRC continue to expand ZTC course offerings. At the same time, CRC should continue to explore ways to improve the ZTC system, such as options for students who prefer hardcopy ZTC materials, and continuing to edit and improve ZTC resources. Students who participated in the focus groups all expressed excitement at the possibility of expanded ZTC course offerings.

Research Methods

Design

In Fall 2022, the Office of Research & Equity worked with the CRC OER/ZTC Project Lead to design and implement focus groups in order to hear about students' experiences with Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) courses at the college. The research design for these focus groups relied heavily on the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges' Open Educational Resources Initiative (OERI) Student Impact Toolkit¹, which has the goal to "capture, measure, and share the impressions and impact of Open Educational Resources (OER) and Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) course sections on enrolled students". The Office of Research & Equity also relied on previous internal quantitative and qualitative studies about textbook costs at CRC. With these sources as a framework, the Research and Equity Office worked with the OER/ZTC Project Lead to tailor the OERI Toolkit survey questions to CRC's environment.

Participant Recruitment

Because this research is focused on CRC students' experiences with ZTC courses, researchers were primarily interested in hearing from students in those courses. The OER/ZTC Project Lead utilized targeted recruitment by working with instructors of ZTC courses to advertise the focus groups. Instructors shared a Google Form with students that asked them for their availability to participate in a conversation about ZTC courses. Utilizing the twenty responses gathered via this form, the Faculty Researcher set eight dates and times for the focus groups, including two evening options, and sent personal invitations to each interested student. Due to a low-number of sign ups, the OER/ZTC Project Lead also advertised the focus groups via email and Canvas to the general student population, regardless of course type. This resulted in one participant who was not enrolled in a ZTC course, but who was familiar with ZTC courses at CRC. In total, eight CRC students with experience in zero to four ZTC courses participated in six interviews/focus groups. Due to the varied participant availability, four students participated in focus groups of two, while the other four students participated in one-on-one interviews.

A drawing for Panera gift cards was advertised to help incentivize student participation, and at least one faculty member teaching a ZTC course offered extra credit in that course to students who participated in the focus groups, though it was made clear that the opinions

¹ <https://asccc-oeri.org/measuring-student-impact-capturing-student-voices-in-oer-ztc/>

expressed in the focus groups would have no bearing on students' grades and would be anonymized in this report.

Students participating in the focus groups were at different stages in their journey at CRC and had various levels of experience in ZTC courses. While some students were first-year students, others were returning to their studies after several years, having started at CRC before ZTC courses were offered. Table 1 demonstrates the diversity of experiences of the participants in terms of *current fall 2022* ZTC course enrollment, as shared by students.

Number of ZTC Courses in Fall 2022	Number of Focus Group Participants
0	1
1	2
2	2
3	2
4	1

Table 1: Number of ZTC Courses of Participants

Findings

Textbook Costs Have a Bearing on Student Enrollment Decisions

After clarifying the definition of ZTC courses², participants were asked to share about their decision-making process when enrolling in courses and whether the price of textbooks influences their decision to enroll in courses in any way. While some participants said that graduation requirements and instructor ratings had a higher influence on their choice to enroll in a course than textbook costs, all participants noted some preference for ZTC courses. Several students said that, when given the choice between a course with a paid textbook and a comparable ZTC course, they would choose the ZTC course. Another student said the *total price* for all their textbooks might influence their decision to enroll in a course with a costly textbook, stating that they would prefer to spread textbook costs out throughout their studies. Still, another student shared that they would simply not enroll in a course with a required high-cost textbook, and several

If I can avoid it, I won't get a textbook.

Yeah, [textbook cost] was an important reason why I choose these classes.

[Zero Textbook Cost] is definitely something I favor if classes aren't waitlisted or full yet...

² The definition used for ZTC materials in these focus groups: *Any digital or print books, reading materials, handouts, or other learning materials that are used as a substitute for materials that might cost money in another class.*

students shared that they had had to drop a course or not take a required course due to the textbook cost.

Some of the books are like two hundred dollars or more, and as you get higher in some of the classes and the units it's—the cost can be significant, and it's when you're working a part time job. And now, being in class...I see some of the students are young...and it's a big burden, and that shouldn't discourage them from enrolling in the course, you know, because they can't afford the textbook.

The way I look at it, it's just more money I spend on paper and toner, because I do like having hard copies of stuff...but I think it is cheaper to just buy paper and ink than, you know, a \$150 textbook that I'm scared to highlight or whatever because I want to resell it...

Students Spend Extra Time and Energy at the Beginning of the Semester Finding Cheaper Textbook Solutions

Participants were asked if they had ever taken a course with a required high-cost textbook but found a way to not purchase that textbook. Most participants expressed that they had either found cost-effective ways to replace a textbook or had tried to but had not succeeded. In addition, several participants explained that some books are listed as “required” for a course, but are under-utilized or not utilized at all. Additionally, two participants described the experience of having difficulty acquiring required textbooks regardless of their cost due to order backlogs in the bookstore or on online sites. Several students alluded to the fact that finding cheaper alternatives to required textbooks necessitates knowledge of the U.S. higher education system and the resources available within it, such as college libraries, other students, the internet, EOPS, etc., and that not all students enter CRC with this knowledge.

In four out of my five classes, I was able to either find a very close edition for it, or work with the professor. For example, my [redacted] class, she has a copy, so we can take pages when we visit.

I use the library in the school, so I take the book from the library so I don't need to buy the book. I did that two times. Because I didn't know it, too, you know I'm new in this country, so I didn't know all the things that you can do, so when you know about this, this is a good option.

Students Say That Cost Savings in ZTC Courses Could Help Them with Other Expenses

Participants were asked to respond to the question, “If all classes at CRC offered free textbooks, how would you spend the money you saved?”. Below are some of the ways participants said they would use the money:

I could use the money for living costs because I am a mom, so I need to buy things for myself, for house, food, everything.

I would probably just save it for when I transfer to university, like the tuition cost there.

I could put it in my savings, but I immediately thought, like, concert tickets...or little things to reward myself throughout the semester.

I think would have, you know, had a car by now, or at least have saved enough money for two, three months’ car payments and insurance.

My parents are supporting me, so I just want to do anything I can to save them money.

I don't own a laptop... partially because some of my money, if the book voucher didn't get to cover the cost for textbooks, I had to pay out of pocket.

How Students Say They Would Otherwise Spend Textbook Money

Living or parenting expenses

-

Future costs at a four-year university

-

Big-ticket items, such as a car or computer

-

Self-rewards

-

Savings

Yes, it was a [redacted] class. When I see the cost I just changed my mind to another class so I could save some money to get the prices of the books for next term.

I think there has been one time where I had to drop the class because I was not going to make or have enough money to pay the books and then get the books on time.

Students Experience Issues with the Textbook System Beyond Just Cost

Participants were also given the opportunity to share any other textbook-related barriers at CRC that they wanted the college to know about. Among the difficulties they described were the following:

- Learning midway through the semester that they had the wrong edition of a book and were missing information
- A “bottleneck” at the beginning of the semester in which there is a perceived rush to get required books online or at the bookstore before they sell out, and sometimes inflated prices as a result
- Not knowing which textbooks are required until after the start of a class
- Feeling as though they had wasted money on a textbook that was underutilized in class

Students Feel that ZTC Courses are a Positive Solution to Issues Surrounding Textbooks

Participants were asked to share how discovering that one or more of their courses used free textbooks. All of the participants said they feel positively about ZTC courses. Two participants who were returning students expressed that

there is an adjustment period involved in not having physical textbooks. One of these student shared that they print most of their ZTC materials, but that they still find this

There has been time where I had to like, buy like a hundred dollar textbook just for it to take the course and do homework on it. But, I did it...I really needed the class for credits, and it was a summer class, too, so there's like really limited options of like, what classes I could take with different professors, because not everybody teaches some of the classes, so I kind of just like stuck through it despite the cost of the book.

I've taken classes with friends before where we just do our work together and share a textbook. But then there are classes where the professor requires a textbook, and I don't even really use it, it felt like. It kind of felt like a way for them to just take my money...

It does tend to be difficult because books are so expensive. I understand EOPS does the best that they can to get, you know, like the book discounts and vouchers out to the students as soon as possible. So I do understand on their behalf, you know, because they're so expensive, I have to wait for this voucher to get to me on time...I get the book like during the third week of the semester, because I was waiting for this book voucher. Whereas if books were less expensive, I would have been like, okay, I'll just buy it myself. Or if it's one of those courses where it's a free textbook, and professors provide all the information, I'm already prepared from the very beginning of the semester.

preferable and cheaper than paying for textbooks. The other student said that not all ZTC materials are in a fully polished state and that they passed editing recommendations on to their professor, but that they enjoyed being a part of a new system that they felt would positively serve students.

I would say that, like the same feeling like it's just more relieving to know that the textbook is already there, so I don't have to worry about where to get it, and how much it's gonna cost.

I was so happy to find that. Um, two main things really. 1) the money at the time, you know. Still, like during Covid, I hadn't found a job or a part time job. And 2) as a student, especially post-Covid and like online classes, I think that one of the reasons I struggled so much with courses was—okay, you give me the reading, what specifically do you want me to read from the reading? So when professors gave me the materials, whether it be videos or recording themselves or pictures, or whatever it might have been, I felt like I had more direction into like, okay, this is the information that they want me to focus on.

I can see it being an issue for people that don't have access to plenty of paper or ink, and a printer at all times. But for me it's been convenient. It's been amazing. I do see how like maybe students would be a little less inclined to, you know, actually read the material if they can't print it out and look at it. I know myself, I'm not gonna click through pages and really comprehend as well as if I have something in hand. But yeah for me, I've found a better way, so I'm definitely liking it.

I think my favorite [ZTC resource] by far has been videos, because it makes me feel like someone is talking to me, someone is showing the information to me. Whereas I love articles, but they could be like active support for videos. In case I didn't understand anything with the video, I could go back and read and re-read until I get the information there and I fully grasp what's trying to be taught. I would say videos are my favorite for sure.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Overall, the students who participated in the ZTC focus groups expressed overwhelming support for ZTC courses. Even those students who said they like to have a hard copy of course materials said that they prefer the ZTC course system. Based on these findings, in combination with internal research that found that courses with higher textbook costs in Fall 2021 had significantly more pre-census drops during the first weeks of the semester (Meinz, 2022), the Office of Research & Equity recommends that CRC continue to expand ZTC course offerings. At the same time, CRC should continue to explore ways to improve the ZTC system, such as options for students who prefer hardcopy ZTC materials, and continuing to edit and improve ZTC resources. Students who participated in the focus groups all expressed excitement at the possibility of expanded ZTC course offerings.