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Project Z-Degree Will Make College More Affordable

By Kurt Liebich, President, Idaho State Board of Education

The cost of textbooks can be daunting for college students. That cost, often hundreds of dollars per semester added to the cost of tuition, and in some cases room and board, can be a deciding factor on whether a student enrolls or not, or whether they choose to continue their studies. Even among students who do enroll, many choose not to purchase textbooks because of the costs, making it harder for them to succeed.

Project Z-degree is designed to address that. “It’s a movement, it’s a change initiative starting on Idaho’s community college campuses that may eventually spread to our four-year institutions as well,” said Dr. TJ Bliss, the State Board of Education’s Chief Academic Officer.

The ‘Z’ in Project Z-degree stands for ‘zero cost’ and the goal is to make it possible for students to earn an associate degree with zero or very low textbook costs.

The Idaho Legislature and Governor Brad Little jump-started this change initiative by investing \$1 million in Project Z-degree earlier this year as part of the Governor’s “Building Idaho’s Future” initiative.

The money will be used to help community college faculty who choose to participate in the effort transition their courses to zero-cost or very low-cost instructional materials such as open educational resources, or OER. “It really

works well at the community college level because Idaho has common courses for General Education, making it easier to share curriculum resources across these courses,” Bliss said. “Idaho faculty have developed a new textbook for first year writing courses, for example, that is open licensed (meaning other faculty can adopt and adapt it for their courses) and freely available to students online through the Idaho Open Press.” <https://Idaho.pressbooks.pub/write/>

Z-degree programs are in the works in big states like Texas, New York and California and community colleges in other parts of the country are working on their own versions too.

At the College of Southern Idaho (CSI) in Twin Falls, Provost Dr. Todd Schwarz said, “I’ve always had a sour taste in my mouth about the cost of textbooks.” Schwarz has set a personal and professional goal to make CSI the first zero textbook cost public institution in Idaho and CSI is taking the lead on Project Z-degree. “I see OER as a significant contributor to the success of Project Z-degree, and now it's time to get the faculty engaged and make some real progress.”

Project Z-degree programs will focus first on associate degrees in liberal arts and general studies and eventually expand into AA degrees in business.

Dr. Jonathan Lashley, the Board’s Associate Chief Academic Officer says community college faculty are already working on making Project Z-degree a reality. “They know they have the support and the enthusiasm of their administrative leaders at their institutions, the State Board of Education and support from elected leaders too,” Lashley said. “They (faculty) know that what they are doing with zero cost degrees is valued, that their work is recognized and being promoted. That is a powerful thing for educators.”

The goal is to launch Project Z-degree in time for the 2023 fall semester at all four of Idaho’s community colleges. “If you are a student, two years from now you will be able to earn either a liberal arts or a general studies associate’s degree without paying more than \$30 for any textbook, and in most degree pathways, without paying anything for textbooks at all,” Bliss said.

Access and affordability are top priorities at the Idaho State Board of Education. The Board is committed to doing all it can to keep public higher education costs as low as possible. Project Z-degree will save individual students hundreds, if not thousands of dollars during their college careers. We also know from similar initiatives in other states that collectively, this new effort will save students

millions over time and remove the cost of textbooks as a negative factor when deciding whether to enroll or continue in college.

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