



Essay

Beyond the “New Normal”: A Four-Year Reflection on Textbook Access, Affordability, and Open Education Library Services

Michelle Brailey, *University of Alberta*

Sonya Betz, *University of Alberta*

ABSTRACT

This piece looks back on a column we wrote in 2022, reflecting upon our experience during the COVID-19 pandemic called “A Sustainable Way Forward: A Team-based Approach to Tackling Textbook Access and Affordability Issues During the “New Normal.” We highlight some of the changes, good and bad, that have emerged following the pandemic, including our institution’s growing recognition of the value of reducing the costs of course materials for students alongside the challenges of increasingly restricted access to print textbooks and the broader trend of publishers moving towards flat-fee textbook access fees.

KEYWORDS

Open Education, Course materials, Textbook affordability

SUGGESTED CITATION

Brailey, M.; & Betz, S. (2026). Beyond the “new normal”: A four-year reflection on textbook access, affordability, and open education library services. *Journal of New Librarianship*, 11(2), 148–151. <https://doi.org/10.33011/newlibs/21/12>

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



Introduction

In February 2022, we wrote “A Sustainable Way Forward: A Team-based Approach to Tackling Textbook Access and Affordability Issues During the ‘New Normal,’” a column reflecting upon our experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. It considered our institution’s emergency, mid-term move toward online course delivery during the pandemic, and it highlighted deeply ingrained issues in libraries’ relationships with textbook publishers. It also addressed systemic issues regarding affordability of educational materials, and it outlined how our library adapted Open Education services within the context of the rapidly changing pandemic situation. Nearly 5 years later, the pandemic still looms in the rearview mirror. While our Open Educational Resources (OER) program has made significant progress, the systemic issues identified still exist, and we face new complexities presented by the rapid and disruptive growth of generative AI tools in librarianship, teaching, and learning. Our campus has shown growing recognition for the value of cost savings to students, but these gains come alongside the challenges of disappearing access to print textbooks, the broader move of publishers towards “equitable access” textbook programs, and the ever-increasing costs of course materials.

Program Development: Zero Textbook Cost Initiative

Looking back to the original article was a great reflection on how our OER program has developed over a relatively short period. We are happy to report that our OER programs are thriving as the result of a sustained shift toward supporting the adoption of a Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) campus-wide program at the University of Alberta.

ZTC courses are those in which students incur no costs for their class materials. These courses are labelled in the registration system so they can be easily identified by students. The ZTC initiative began as a pilot program in 2021 thanks to the advocacy of the Student’s Union, and it is supported by a partnership between the library, the Students’ Union, and the Office of the Registrar. Additionally, the University of Alberta established a new Coalition for Affordable Course Materials in 2024, bringing together partners from the Library, the Students’ Union, the Dean of Students, the Vice Provost of Teaching and Learning, the Registrar’s Office, and the bookstore to investigate strategies for reducing course materials costs for students.

The University of Alberta was the first large Canadian institution to implement a campus-wide ZTC program, and it quickly became an institutional priority. In 2023, the [University of Alberta’s Student Experience Action Plan](#) announced a goal to achieve ZTC in 35% of all undergraduate courses by 2026. By winter 2024, around 30% of courses were ZTC. That year, the library embarked on a ZTC Campus Tour to bolster these numbers to meet the 35% goal. The Tour included presentations to 39 different faculties and departments promoting the ZTC initiative and other supporting library services.

The results of this tremendous effort were not what we expected. While ZTC savings have grown, and the University of Alberta Students’ Union estimates that students have saved up to

50 million dollars since the ZTC program began (Almeida, P., & Tamsett, K. 2025). Despite this success the number of courses labelled as ZTC has not grown beyond 30%.

Although it is possible that the ZTC program rapidly reached its saturation point, we do not believe this is the case. Our interactions with instructors during our tour presentations, along with increased collaboration and communication between the ZTC partners, uncovered significant data reporting gaps, which lead to underreporting of the number of courses like ZTC. The Coalition for Affordable Course Materials created a ZTC Working Group in 2025 to resolve some of the data reporting and collection issues, and it ran an instructor survey and focus groups in winter 2026 to better understand the barriers to ZTC adoption. The final report and recommendations of this work are still underway. We are hopeful changes can be made to improve the registration process so we can truly see the impact of ZTC on our campus and better understand how to support instructors in making their courses ZTC.

When it comes to Library support for OE and ZTC, our services have also changed since our 2022 column. Open Education supports that were developed during the early phase of COVID are now folded into our broader ZTC approach. In our last reflection, we had recruited a team of library Information Service Specialists staff to search for OE materials that could be used to support 130 undergraduate courses on campus. Results were shared with subject librarians to communicate to their departments. This project, however, did not continue far from this stage. OER searching has since taken an on-demand approach. Instructors who are curious about ZTC can request that we search for materials that include OER, library subscribed materials that have unlimited concurrent access, and other open access materials as relevant for the subject area.

A further change has been how we support OE publishing, with institutional funding supporting a collaborative hosted model of Pressbooks between 14 post-secondary institutions through an initiative called [Open Education Alberta](#).

Future Challenges

Despite the significant gains made in OE adoption and awareness through the ZTC implementation, our progress faces a major emerging challenge due to the University of Alberta Bookstore's adoption of a flat fee commercial textbook billing program in fall 2026. These so-called "equitable access" programs are not yet widespread in Canada, with the University of Alberta's adoption being promoted by the institution, and provider Follett, as the first of its kind in the country (Follett Higher Education 2026). Despite sustained, multi-year opposition by students and librarians, summarized in a letter of concern drafted and signed by more than 40 librarians (Betz et al. 2026), this program is scheduled to launch in September. We expect the impacts to include an increase in course materials costs for students and a decrease in the adoption of ZTC by instructors, both of which are directly counter to our goals for our Open Education program in the library.

Finally, we cannot draft a reflection on librarianship without considering the role of emerging generative AI technologies. Like all other facets of librarianship, AI is reshaping teaching, learning, and Open Education. These tools are being used to create learning materials, assess and tutor students, and are increasingly ubiquitous in digital learning environments. While the potential of gen AI to support our Open Education program is significant, the ethical implications are vast and complex, and we are watching developments here carefully.

References

- Almeida, P., & Tamsett, K. (2025). Zero Textbook Cost Moving Forward Report of the UASU's vision for open education at the UofA. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1NrDRnjqO4SlkdbnglLdsjmoos3Jwzolt5dCR4K36AU/edit?tab=t.npjbyrgl69b>
- Betz et al. (2026). Letter of Concern Regarding the Course Materials Access Program. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Y5qN1lKdMus8q2B18hRmVwPntoCHV_YtaOyu7yWkXaE/edit?tab=t.o
- Follett Higher Education. (2026). Follett to Launch Canada's First Campus-Wide Course Material Access Program at the University of Alberta. <https://follett.com/press-release/follett-to-launch-canadas-first-campus-wide-course-material-access-program-at-the-university-of-alberta/>