



UNIVERSITY
OF ALBERTA

Moving Towards Zero Textbook Costs

Listening, Learning and Taking Action

DRAFT

Date:
September 2026



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The University of Alberta, its buildings, labs and research stations are primarily located on the territory of Néhiyaw (Cree), Niitsitapi (Blackfoot), Métis, Nakoda (Stoney), Dene, Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) and Anishinaabe (Ojibway/Saulteaux), lands that are now known as part of Treaties 6, 7 and 8 and homeland of the Métis. The University of Alberta respects the sovereignty, lands, histories, languages, knowledge systems and cultures of all First Nations, Métis, and Inuit.

INTRODUCTION

For some University of Alberta students, the cost of course materials is not a minor inconvenience; it can be a barrier to learning. Efforts to promote textbook affordability alongside the creation and use of Open Educational Resources (OER) have been underway at the university since at least 2016. The University of Alberta has established a Coalition for Affordable Course Materials, co-led by Student Success and Experience and Library & Museums, to: examine the current state of course material costs incurred by students, explore barriers instructors may face in the course material selection process, and investigate supports that would foster a learning environment where more affordable course materials can be assigned more consistently. The Coalition is committed to hearing from instructors and student representatives about their current perceptions and experiences on Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) and OER and translating these insights into an action plan to enhance course affordability.

Since its launch in August 2021, the Zero Textbook Cost initiative has saved students up to an estimated \$57 million, with roughly 30% of courses now carrying the ZTC designation. The University of Alberta Students' Union (UASU) estimates the 2026 academic year savings at up to \$14.2 million¹. At the University of Alberta, the *Student Experience Action Plan* explicitly sets goals to make course materials more affordable. Expanding ZTC courses and adopting OER are important pillars in mitigating financial barriers for students. From the UASU's perspective, there is recognition of Zero Textbook Cost initiatives as an important affordability measure that reduces financial barriers students face and helps ensure students can fully participate in their courses from day one.

This report draws on survey and focus group data collected from across the University of Alberta community from 2025 to 2026 to examine how instructors select course materials, how familiar they are with ZTC reporting and OER programs and what barriers may be limiting broader participation.

Faculty survey responses indicate that while there is broad support for reducing students' course material costs, primary structural and administrative barriers impede ZTC adoption. Instructors identified fragmented reporting systems, limited time for course redesign, inconsistent awareness of available supports, and a lack of formal recognition as key challenges that limit broader participation.

¹ University of Alberta Students' Union, [Estimate Saving 2025/26 Report](#).

Methodology

To gather input from the university community, a mixed methodology approach was used, employing a survey and focus groups. The survey was distributed to all University of Alberta instructors who had taught in the previous year (N=3021). The survey ran for three weeks in November 2025 and received 604 responses, representing a 20% response rate. Please see Appendix A for the list of survey questions and Appendix B for the demographic breakdown of recipients and respondents.

A higher proportion of Academic Teaching Staff (ATS) recipients responded (23%) as compared to Faculty (18%). Response rates varied across colleges, with the highest rate coming from instructors in the standalone faculties (30.8%). It is acknowledged that the survey results may be subject to non-response bias, and that supporters of ZTC approaches may have been more likely to respond, thereby leading to estimates of ZTC awareness and adoption as presented below that are higher than in reality.

In March 2026, three focus groups were held with instructors from North Campus and another was held with instructors from Augustana. Input from Campus Saint-Jean leadership was collected separately. In total, 12 participants contributed to these one-hour conversations, which were recorded, transcribed and reviewed to identify common themes. Participants also had the opportunity to share any additional opinions or insights via a post-focus group reflection form. These experiences were authentic and added value by supplementing the qualitative responses received from the survey, as the commentary was largely aligned.

Themes

Primary influencers in course material selection

When asked to identify the top factors that influence their selection of course materials, survey participants most commonly prioritized student learning outcomes (69.4%), affordability (39.1%) and continuity with materials used in previous course offerings (34.1%). Instructors across the survey and focus groups indicated that they did not always have full autonomy over these decisions. Survey analysis found that Academic Teaching Staff were more likely than faculty to report assigning department-recommended materials (13% vs. 6%). In large multi-section courses, material selection may be made collectively or determined by an Associate Dean or Course Coordinator.

Over a quarter of respondents (26.7%) from the College of Natural and Applied Sciences indicated that they choose not to assign required course readings at all, compared with an overall average of 15.9%. Echoing these survey findings, instructors from focus groups shared that they are actively helping students manage costs by recommending older editions, shared

copies, rentals or library-held materials and by reclassifying textbooks from required to recommended. Focus group discussions also explored course-level differences, highlighting introductory courses' tendency to rely more heavily on textbooks for structure, while upper-level courses are generally perceived as easier to transition to ZTC using journal articles and library resources.

Within the survey, the importance of test banks ranked low overall (3.6%), with importance differing by discipline; 16% of respondents in nursing ranked it as a top factor compared to none in several faculties (e.g., Campus Saint-Jean and Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation). Their importance was further emphasized by a few focus group participants who discussed the time-saving advantages of textbooks, such as publisher-supplied practice and exam questions, regularly updated case studies, and audio/visual supplements that support language learners. One focus group participant noted alternatives, including AI tools, which can help address this by generating questions from open-access readings.

Awareness and adoption trends

Survey respondents reported substantially higher rates of ZTC adoption than institutional reporting data. According to survey results, 72% of instructors reported having adopted a ZTC approach in at least one previously taught course, compared to approximately 30% (SU report, [link below](#)) of courses that are institutionally reported as ZTC. This discrepancy may reflect both non-response bias and underreporting of ZTC activity through current reporting processes.

While 77% of respondents indicated awareness of the ability to flag a course as ZTC in BearTracks, among the 134 respondents who were unaware of ZTC reporting and formal designation processes, 55% reported having previously adopted ZTC approaches. This difference suggests that a portion of ZTC activity may not be captured in institutional reporting due to awareness gaps. Survey and focus group participants provided additional context for this gap, citing administrative complexity, uncertainty regarding eligibility criteria, and a lack of clarity about reporting procedures. Additionally, focus group participants emphasized the importance of reaching instructors early in their teaching careers as a strategy to encourage adoption of ZTC approaches from the outset. It was also recommended to introduce ZTC practices and OER resources during faculty onboarding, orientation programs and structured course design initiatives before course material selection practices become firmly established.

These findings suggest that current institutional reporting processes may not fully capture the extent of ZTC activity occurring across the university. College-, Faculty-, and Department-level adoption and awareness rates are presented in Appendix D alongside Winter 2026 ZTC reporting data compiled by the Registrar's Office.

Identified barriers to ZTC adoption

Open-ended responses in the survey and focus group participants highlighted that the transition to ZTC is often hindered by systemic and administrative friction rather than a lack of faculty interest. The barriers below reflect consistent messaging gleaned across both survey and focus group data.

Fragmented reporting channels

- Instructors currently navigate multiple, disconnected systems, including Google Forms, Bookstore emails and departmental workflows that sit outside their normal course management processes.
- Eligibility criteria are not always clear, and communication to instructors about registering qualifying courses as ZTC often arrives after courses have already been developed.
- Data entry in BearTracks remains manual and is typically completed by the Office of the Registrar staff in late August, limiting the usefulness of the ZTC indicator for students trying to assess course costs earlier in the registration cycle. The reporting window also tends to fall during peak course preparation periods.
- Instructors reported that they do not receive confirmation that their courses have been successfully flagged, creating uncertainty about whether their submissions were processed correctly.

Instructor resource constraints

- Reviewing, adapting and integrating open educational resources or other no-cost reading materials is time-intensive work that is not typically reflected in faculty contracts or compensation structures.
- Academic Teaching Staff expressed that contracts often do not allow adequate time for course design and that they may teach a wide range of courses with little continuity between terms.

Open resource availability

- In fields such as education, instructors noted a shortage of open resources relevant to a Canadian context. Some focus group participants noted they are considering creating their own reading lists or open textbooks, which, while time-intensive, ultimately offers greater diversity of voices, more engaging readings, and materials that reflect the literature students will encounter in their careers.
- Instructors mentioned that OERs may not currently exist for their subject areas while also expressing concerns about the quality of the OERs that do exist, and noted a lack of time to develop or update them.

- Input from Campus Saint-Jean leadership indicated that French resources are less likely to be available electronically, making it more challenging for instructors to transition to ZTC approaches.

Lack of awareness of supports

- While we did not ask survey or focus group participants about library services specifically, a few respondents commented that they were unaware of the library's OER finding service or that library staff are available to assist with identifying library resources and generating course reading lists.
- Participants emphasized that more coordinated and consistent messaging regarding ZTC and OER approaches from the full suite of campus partners involved in teaching, learning, and pedagogical support would help improve awareness and adoption of existing services and resources.

Fragmented coordination in multi-instructor courses

- In disciplines such as the sciences and economics, reaching consensus on alternative materials across multiple course sections can be difficult. When reliable commercial materials are already in use, coordination and workload constraints often reinforce continued reliance on existing textbooks.

Institutional culture and academic freedom

- Approximately 2% of survey respondents raised concerns about prioritizing cost reduction over pedagogical relevance. These instructors emphasized that some paid materials remain the most appropriate choice for their courses, including language workbooks, audio/visual resources integral to student learning, and textbooks aligned with national or industry standards. These responses emphasize the importance of maintaining instructor autonomy and academic freedom while continuing to expand awareness and adoption of affordable alternatives where appropriate.

Identified enablers to ZTC adoption

The survey data on instructor-identified enablers of ZTC implementation highlights access to high-quality OER content (31%), expanded library OER support (26%), and structured institutional incentives (21%) as the most important conditions for increasing adoption. Survey and focus group participants emphasized that instructors are more likely to transition to ZTC approaches when affordable alternatives meet the same pedagogical and disciplinary standards as traditional commercial materials. Participants also noted that greater visibility and accessibility of institutional supports can reduce the time and effort required to identify and implement affordable course materials. At the same time, respondents highlighted that adopting ZTC often involves substantial course redesign and resource development work. Providing dedicated funding, time and formal recognition for these efforts was identified as a

key facilitator of broader participation. Focus group participants noted that ZTC adoption is unlikely to grow significantly as long as it remains primarily voluntary work with limited institutional recognition. There was a clear call to integrate OER development into annual service evaluations, broader teaching, learning recognition structures and faculty contracts.

Recommendations

Based on the survey and focus group data in conjunction with feedback from campus partners (Centre for Teaching and Learning, Registrar’s Office, Online Learning, University of Alberta Bookstore) and student partners, the following recommendations are proposed to move the initiative from individual effort to a sustainable institutional model through collaborative action across the Coalition for Affordable Course Materials and campus partners. The Coalition will take the lead on identifying support and resources in support of the listed actions. Progress on the Key Performance Indicators (to be developed by sub-groups) for recommended actions will be reviewed and reported bi-annually as implementation milestones are reached to support accountability, continuous improvement, and institutional planning.

1. Implement targeted outreach and support for adoption

Action	Start	Collaborators
Explore opportunities to engage instructors earlier in the course planning cycle when there is a confirmed intent to redesign a course to reduce student course material costs, enabling sufficient time for OER adoption, adaptation or development.	Fall 2026	- Centre for Teaching and Learning - Faculties - Library & Museums
Expand consistent coordination among the Library and Museums and Centre for Teaching and Learning to provide instructors with course design expertise that supports OER discovery, adoption, adaptation and creation.	Fall 2026	- Centre for Teaching and Learning - Library & Museums
Expand professional development opportunities, including workshops, communities of practice and new instructor orientation programs, to increase awareness and adoption of Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) initiatives, OER resources and affordable course material strategies.	Winter 2027	- Centre for Teaching and Learning - Library & Museums
Cultivate and continue province-wide partnerships, such as Open Education Alberta, for OER development and sharing.	Summer 2026	- Centre for Teaching and Learning - Library & Museums

Establish a sustainable OER Grants Program to support instructors undertaking course redesign and the adoption, adaptation, creation or renewal of open educational resources.	Summer 2026	• Student Success and Experience
Explore the responsible use of AI-enabled tools to support the development of ancillary resources (question banks, case studies and slide decks).	Spring 2027	• Centre for Teaching and Learning • Faculties
Identify gaps in available OER resources (e.g., Canadian context and French-language materials, contextual, accessible) and work to address the gaps.	Winter 2027	• Faculties • Library & Museums
Collaborate with instructors teaching high-enrolment and high-cost courses where textbook costs may present the greatest financial burden for students and where ZTC adoption has the potential to benefit the largest number of learners.	Winter 2027	• Centre for Teaching and Learning • Faculties • Library & Museums
Increase awareness and utilization of existing supports and services, including the OER Library website, OER Finding Service, OER Publishing Service, subject librarian expertise and the Library's course reading list service.	Fall 2026	• Centre for Teaching and Learning • Communications • Library & Museums
Promote the adaptation and reuse of OER developed for online learning courses for in-person classes where appropriate.	Spring 2027	• Centre for Teaching and Learning • Library & Museums • Online Education

2. Streamline administrative processes for ZTC course reporting

Action	Start	Collaborators
Modernize ZTC reporting processes by integrating course-designation workflows into existing institutional systems, reducing reliance on manual reporting and simplifying participation for instructors.	Fall 2026	• Bookstore • Registrar's Office
Implement automated confirmation notification to instructors once their course has been successfully designated as ZTC.	Fall 2026	• Registrar's Office

Explore opportunities to align ZTC designation and reporting timelines with the course development cycle and student registration process to ensure accurate and timely information is available to students.	Winter 2027	• Colleges • Faculties • Registrar's Office
Conduct regular reviews of ZTC reporting processes and data quality to improve accuracy, reduce administrative burden and support institutional goals related to course materials affordability.	Ongoing	• Bookstore • Registrar's Office

3. Recognition, Sustainability and Continued Improvement

Action	Start	Collaborators
Implement institutional recognition practices that acknowledge faculty leadership in the adoption, adaptation and creation of OER and ZTC course materials.	Fall 2026	• Centre for Teaching and Learning • Faculties • Graduate Students' Association • Library & Museums • Provost's Office • Faculty Relations • University of Alberta Students' Union
Continue to embed student voice in the continuous improvement of course material affordability initiatives and priorities through regular engagement with student leaders.	Summer 2026	• Graduate Students' Association • University of Alberta Students' Union
Establish a continual reporting framework to communicate progress on affordable course materials initiatives, including ZTC adoption, student savings and outcomes related to access and student success.	Summer 2027	• Centre for Teaching and Learning • Library & Museums • Registrar's Office • Student Success and Experience • Communications

Conclusion

The findings of this consultation demonstrate that instructors across the University of Alberta are already making significant efforts to reduce course material costs for students. Existing ZTC participation is likely higher than current reporting mechanisms capture, and many instructors are independently adopting strategies to improve affordability and access. At the same time, the findings indicate that future growth in ZTC and OER adoption will depend less on persuading instructors of the value of affordability and more on reducing administrative barriers, improving institutional coordination and providing sustainable supports for course redesign and resource development.

Expanding ZTC-centred courses supports the University of Alberta Students' Union's long-term goal of improving student success and accessibility to higher education, and aligns with priorities around affordability. The University of Alberta is well-positioned to build on the momentum of the ZTC initiative and strengthen its leadership in affordable and accessible education. Continued investment in coordinated systems, faculty support and institutional recognition will be essential to sustaining and expanding this work in the years ahead.

Acknowledgements

Samar Barazesh, Trish Chatterley, Michelle Brailey, Sarah Freeman, and Ravina Sanghera

Coalition team members and ZTC working group members: Karsten Mundel, Katherine Huising, Norma Rodenburg, Aron Horvath, Adam Medaglia, Katie Tamsett, Layla Alhussainy, Susan Huseynova, Amanda Wakaruk, Sonya Betz

Deep gratitude to faculty leadership and instructors who participated in the survey and focus groups.

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Resource List

1. Estimated Savings from ZTC Courses 2025/26:
https://www.su.ualberta.ca/documents/1394/Estimated_Savings_from_ZTC_Courses_202526_1.pdf
2. Department of Research and Advocacy. (2024) Textbooks Survey Report.
https://s3.su.ualberta.ca/www-dynamic/documents/Textbooks_Survey_Report_2024.pdf
3. Almeida, P. & Tamsett, K. (2025) Zero Textbook Cost moving forward: Report of the UASU's vision for open education at the UofA.
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1KrXL1qGc2piTVXiA2VknJPfmt-5gDEEP/view>
4. McMaster University Library. (n.d.). Open educational resources (OER) guide. McMaster University Library
<https://prod-ms-be.lib.mcmaster.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/a23d7740-2fe9-4819-b7bf-41c5dfa4c4de/content>
5. B.C. Institutional Capacity to Support Open Educational Practices
6. <https://bccampus.ca/2025/12/01/b-c-institutional-capacity-to-support-open-educational-practices/>
7. The Multi-Year Impact of Canada's First Zero Textbook Cost Initiative -
<https://openpraxis.org/articles/10.55982/openpraxis.17.2.832>
8. Marking Open and Affordable Courses: Best Practices and Case Studies -
<https://uta.pressbooks.pub/markinopenandaffordablecourses/>
9. Making the Case for OER -
https://drive.google.com/file/d/13h07TbBGXlXhabfglVzffSBb51yok_4_/view
10. Findings of the OER Course Marking Landscape Analysis Survey -
<https://www.mhec.org/policy-research/open-educational-resources>
11. What is ZTC and LTC? - <https://youtu.be/KdvYg8Dk2rA?feature=shared>
12. 2023 ILLINOIS COURSE MATERIALS SURVEY -
https://www.carli.illinois.edu/sites/files/coll_man/2023IllinoisStudentCourseMaterialsSurveyReport.pdf
13. 2023 Illinois Course Materials Survey: Student Perspective -
https://www.carli.illinois.edu/sites/files/coll_man/Questionnaire_230912_CC_BY_4.0.pdf
14. 2024 Z-Degree Report - <https://sway.cloud.microsoft/s5gzSVxt1QynJHcO?ref=Link>
15. 2025 Z-Degree Report to the Legislature -
<https://www.minnstate.edu/admissions/oer/images-docs/z-degree-legislative-report-2025.pdf>
16. Z-Degrees In Oregon -
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QtD3UGC--NRDd1bE7W58NlqlqDOrMC5lckUFuCLPebg/edit?tab=t.0>
17. Toward Convergence - Creating Clarity to Drive More Consistency in Understanding the Benefits and Costs of OER -

https://mhec.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/2022MHECOER-Toward-Convergence_compressed.pdf

18. Student Impact Toolkit: Measuring Student Impact and Capturing Student Voices in OER/ZTC -

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

19. Achieving the Dream Report:

https://achievingthedream.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/atd_oer_at_scale_academic_economic_outcomes_feb_2020.pdf

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Appendix A

Survey questions

1. Please select the top three factors that influence your selection of required course materials for undergraduate-level classes. For the purposes of this question, we define required course materials as textbooks, scholarly monographs, coursepacks, case studies, homework systems (eg. Top Hat) or any other item you would register as course materials via the Bookstore.
 - I have assigned the course material(s) before
 - The course material is the one recommended by the department
 - The course materials help my students achieve the learning outcomes I set for my course
 - I have adapted required course materials in response to student feedback about effectiveness of learning materials
 - It is the best course material(s) in my field
 - I wrote the course materials
 - It is available digitally through the library's collection
 - It has accessibility features I value
 - Availability of test banks
 - Availability of accompanying PowerPoint slides
 - Availability of online interactivity with students (eg., discussions, polls, quizzes)
 - Affordability for students
 - I choose not to assign required course materials
 - Other
2. When redesigning a course, as you identify and select new course materials, what barriers do you encounter?
3. Under the University of Alberta's Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) Initiative, instructors are encouraged to ensure their courses are flagged as ZTC in Bear Tracks if students won't incur any costs for accessing course materials. Required readings may be derived from the library's digital collection, materials in the public domain, or through use of openly available educational materials. The library can provide support to instructors in finding Open Educational Resources (OER) that already exist that can be used as is or adapted (explore resources here or contact oyer.support@ualberta.ca to make use of this service), and also provides a platform for hosting OERs that you may choose to develop yourself. Prior to this survey, did you know that you could indicate that your course has Zero Textbook Costs? (Y/N/NA)
4. Have you adopted a ZTC approach for any of your courses? (Y/N)

- If Yes, why?
 - If No, why not?
 - Not Applicable
5. What barriers have you encountered in the past that prevented you from having your course flagged as ZTC in Bear Tracks, even if it qualified?
 6. What would help you adapt your courses to carry Zero Textbook Costs for students?
 7. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about the selection of course materials?

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Appendix B

Respondent demographics of survey responses

The overall response rate was 20%

Response rate

- 354 of 1945 faculty responded (18.2% of faculty recipients), comprising 58.6% of total respondents.
- 228 of 993 Academic Teaching Staff responded (23% of ATS recipients), comprising 37.7% of total respondents.
- 22 of 83 Faculty Service Officer recipients responded (26.5% of FSO recipients), comprising 3.6% of total respondents.

Analysis

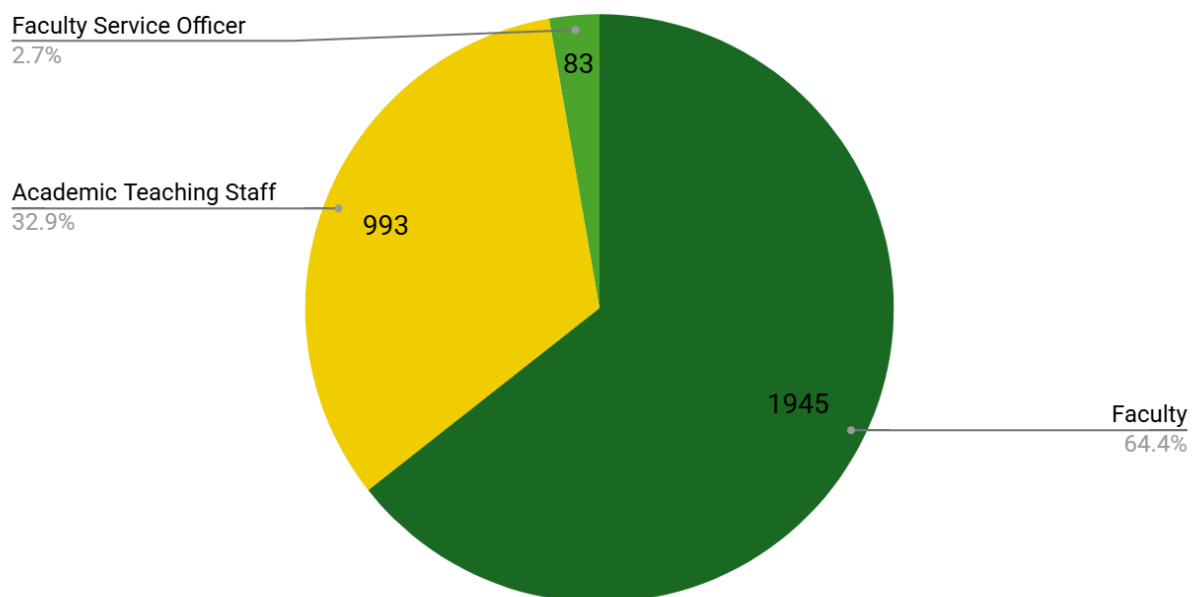
- Response rate is relatively consistent among employment categories.
- A greater proportion of ATS recipients responded (23%) than Faculty recipients (18.2%).
- FSO data is included in Employment Type data and analysis, but the small number of respondents (n=22) should be kept in mind.

Employment type

The following chart disaggregates recipients by employment type.

ZTC Survey Recipients by Employment Type

n=3021

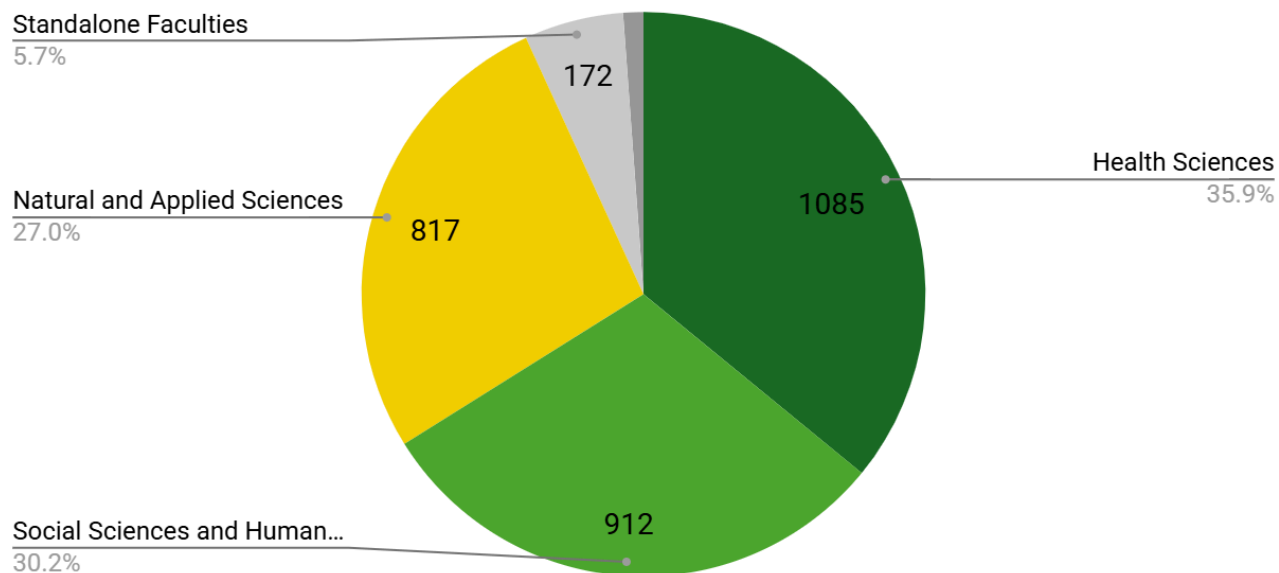


College type

The following chart disaggregates recipients by college.

ZTC Survey Recipients by College

n=3021



Appendix C

Focus group questions

1. What influences your decisions about what course materials to assign?
2. What makes it difficult for instructors who are interested in ZTC to implement it at the University of Alberta?
3. If you were to change the required readings for your course(s) today, what would you need to make that transition? What would be the biggest barrier?
4. If you were designing a system to support yourself and your fellow instructors in implementing ZTC, what would it look like?

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Appendix D

College-, faculty- and department-level adoption and awareness rates

Faculty	Fall 2025 % of ZTC Classes (RO data)	Aware of ZTC Flag (survey data)	Have adopted ZTC (survey data)	Faculty level response rate (survey data)
School of Public Health	32.50%	88.89%	88.89%	28.13% (9/32)
Agricultural, Life & Environmental Sciences	40.22%	75.00%	82.50%	29.2% (40/137)
Pharmacy	47.46%	66.67%	75.00%	29.27% (12/41)
Engineering	30.09%	80.72%	74.70%	18.28% (53/290)
Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation	31.36%	78.57%	71.43%	24.56% (14/57)
Education	38.44%	70.37%	70.37%	28.42% (54/190)
Augustana	22.76%	91.43%	68.57%	24.56% (14/57)
Campus Saint-Jean	21.15%	58.33%	66.67%	17.65% (12/68)
Arts	25.14%	75.89%	65.96%	25.5% (141/553)
Science	38.15%	75.89%	65.96%	21.28% (83/390)
Nursing	50.66%	84.21%	57.89%	13.29% (19/143)
Rehab Med	27.71%	66.67%	55.56%	11.69% (9/77)
Native Studies	34.15%	83.33%	50.00%	30.0% (6/20)
Business	26.79%	70.37%	48.15%	20.77% (27/130)
Medicine & Dentistry	28.32%	38.89%	45.83%	9.8% (72/735)
Law	15.75%	85.71%	42.86%	35.9% (14/39)
Totals:	29.24%	76.57%	72.06%	19.99% (604/3021)