

THE VALUE OF “FREE”: IMPROVING STUDENTS EXPERIENCE THROUGH OPEN EDUCATION RESOURCES

FLORENCE DADDEY – Centre for Teaching, Learning and Innovation

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

The use of open educational resources (OERs) at the Justice Institute of British Columbia (JIBC) seeks to increase accessibility and affordability of education for students. In 2015, the JIBC Law Enforcement Studies Diploma (LESD) program transitioned from being textbook dependent to the creation of Canada's **first** Zero-Cost Credential (Zed Cred) program.

Zed Cred allows students to complete and earn an academic credential using zero cost (100% free) learning resources including open textbooks and library materials. With funding support from BCcampus and the use of BCcampus open technology Pressbooks, faculty can produce and maintain content to meet students learning needs and reduce their overall costs. LESD students continue to benefit from these cost savings.

Lowering cost of textbooks for students year by year



2014-2018 LESD students saved approximately \$130,000 – \$152,880 in textbook costs.

Increasing education cost not only creates a financial burden for students, it can also inhibit the quality of the learning experience. Prior to Zed Cred 60% of LESD students chose not to buy at least one of their required textbooks because of cost compared to 54% of all BC Post-Secondary students (Jhangiani and Jhangiani 2017).

This study seeks to examine the value of the use of zero cost textbooks to LESD students and the research questions include:

1. How has the cost savings from the use of open textbook benefited students?
2. What was the impact on their lives, academic behaviours, and learning?
3. How did LESD students perceive the quality of open textbook, as compared to commercial textbooks?

METHODS

This is an exploratory qualitative study using a survey which includes closed and open-ended questions administered to students enrolled in the LESD program (January to April 2019). Approval from the JIBC Research Ethics Board was granted and Qualtrics survey tool was used. The survey link was posted on Students Campus inviting students to complete the confidential and anonymous survey, 68 out of 250 (30%) students responded.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The results were based on self-reported data from LESD students. Socio-demographic factors including age, gender, hours worked per week, annual income, sources of funding to pay for studies and permanent address were included in the survey. Age and hours worked distribution were consistent with the overall JIBC “Student Trajectory” created by Morgan and Ruttan (2014) and Institutional Research data.

- **60%** of respondents said it was difficult or somewhat difficult to afford textbooks each semester
- Approximately **60%** worked between **11 – 30 hours a week** and complete a full course load
- **85%** strongly agreed or agreed that they liked the choices offered by open textbooks to access materials in different formats

Emerging Model - Pay tuition, textbooks are free!

“Since 2 of my textbooks were OERs this semester I saved \$260, which went towards gas”

“There are classes where I didn't buy the textbooks because they cost more than \$100. In classes that used OERs, I had access to the textbooks.”

“I used the savings from not buying textbooks to pay towards diving lessons”

“I'm able to volunteer more time since I'm not worried about picking extra shifts at work to purchase textbooks”

“I used the money to buy personal care products and gym membership”



Ways in which cost savings benefitted LESD students enhancing their overall educational success.

“I was able to redirect the money from textbook purchases to other areas to further my learning buying a laptop”

“I used the money towards rent”

“It is great to be able to save money on textbooks. With the money that I saved from not having to buy textbooks, I paid tuition for my next semester.”

“Being able to save this additional money has allowed me to relieve some of the extra stress in order to save money and budget well for school. This relieved stress has granted me more time to focus on my education.”

“I was able to access those textbooks at any point. They were always available at my finger tips. If I had a textbook and lost it I would have to buy a new one. Whereas, the online textbook is very hard to lose.”

DISCUSSION

This study attempts to bring students voice more prominently into the OER conversation. The study shows that the creation of the LESD Zed Cred program has impacted the lives of students in the program by addressing student's accessibility and affordability but also influencing students perceptions of their overall learning experience, reduction of financial stress and improved quality of life.

When asked about how they redirected their cost-savings, students provided responses that fell into a few common themes:

- Paying for tuition towards next semesters courses
- Buying learning equipment like laptops
- Paying for living expenses - rent
- Transportation – gas and transit
- Eliminate Financial and Emotional Stress
- Replacing car accessories including battery
- Taking driving lessons
- Gym membership
- Paying debts, eliminates financial stress
- Volunteering – spending more time volunteering instead of working

Students appreciated the fact that the textbooks were customized to particular course requirements and available in different formats made possible by the use of BCcampus Pressbooks. The results were consistent with most published research on the benefits of cost savings from OERs and open textbook (Hendricks, Reinsberg, and Rieger 2017). Students expressed benefits of their involvement in the creation, utilization and advocacy for OER's.

More research is required on the effective use of OERs in improving student learning outcomes in particular the use of open technology – Pressbooks. The findings are based on self-reported data and limited by the low response rate and narrow focus of the topic, nevertheless this research adds to the growing body of knowledge in this area.

CONCLUSION

Zed Cred initiative is saving LESD students a lot of money by making cost of textbooks free or zero cost. Quality of resources, ease of adaptability and freedom of access are made possible with open technology BCcampus Pressbooks. Other disciplinary areas within the JIBC should consider the application of the initiative in their areas.

KEY REFERENCES

- Hendricks, C., Reinsberg, S., & Rieger, G. (2017). The adoption of an open textbook in a large physics course: An analysis of cost, outcomes, use, and perceptions. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 18(4), 78-99. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v18i4.3006>
- Jhangiani, R. & Jhangiani, S. (2017). Investigating the perceptions, use, and impact of open textbooks: A survey of post-secondary students in British Columbia. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 18(4), 172-192. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v18i4.3012>
- Morgan T., & Ruttan, S. (2014). *Evolving towards open at a relatively closed institution* [PowerPoint presentation]. Retrieved from <http://app.emaze.com/1135616/presentation-name#1>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

The case study was supported in part by a grant awarded by BCcampus Open Education 2018 Research and Advocacy Fellowship.

JUSTICE INSTITUTE OF BRITISH COLUMBIA