

## Abstract

The average cost of college textbooks has risen dramatically over the last decade, contributing to textbook price inflation and students' inability to access educational resources equally (Nagle & Vitez, 2021). Open Educational Resources (OER) are teaching, learning, and research materials that are available to the public in any medium under a family of open licensing policies. Openly licensed course materials can be equally accessed by all students on the first day of classes and are often low or no cost.

As student workers with the on-campus OER team, we constructed a student textbook survey to better understand textbook cost effects on students at SUNY Oneonta. The survey contained 21 questions about textbook accessibility, cost, and purchasing choices. Our findings indicate that students are sometimes avoiding purchasing textbooks based on cost and usage in class. Students are finding alternative ways to get information about their course content. The results of this survey inform us about the student textbook climate as well as how to improve OER outreach in the future.

## Methods

Being student interns with the campus OER team, we became interested in expanding access to inexpensive and accessible textbooks. We wondered: how many students are aware of low-cost books, what is textbook availability like for students, and how much are students spending because not everyone is aware of Open Educational Resources? To continue, we constructed a survey for students about textbook usage using similar questions from the Florida Virtual Campus 2018 Student Textbook and Course Materials Survey. After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, we sent our study by email to 1,500 randomly selected part-time and full-time students at SUNY Oneonta. After two weeks of data collection, we received a response rate of 11% and gathered information from an evenly distributed number of SUNY Oneonta students in each undergraduate year (freshmen through seniors).

## Results

### SUNY Oneonta students are considering textbook alternatives because of their high costs.

A little over half (56.9%) of our students spent \$200 or more this spring semester on all course textbooks and other required materials. This is less than in comparison to the Florida 2018 Student Textbook and Course Material Survey, where 66.7% of students were spending \$200 or more.

Students at SUNY Oneonta have been finding methods to avoid spending a significant amount on textbooks. The most popular methods are buying books from other sources besides our campus bookstore (23.5%), choosing rentals (21.9%), and not buying new books (21.7%). In an open response section of the survey, some students claimed, "Most of the time I just don't get the textbook because it's too expensive" and "I do anything to find the cheapest version."

### Students feel that professors are not using the required textbooks enough to buy them.

More than half (61.9%) of SUNY Oneonta students have chosen not to get the required textbook for a course in past. The most-claimed reason students do not purchase or rent the required textbook is that the instructor does not assign readings from the books. One student noted, "It is very stressful on my bank account when I buy multiple books for a course, and only need to read 1-4 chapters from each book."

**61.9%**

of SUNY Oneonta students have not purchased a required text.

The results show close to half (41.3%) of our students have purchased about four books for their courses which were not used during their academic career. Freshman participants reported purchasing an average of 3.6 textbooks that were not used during their academic career so far, while sophomores reported an average of 4.8 textbooks, juniors 5.9 textbooks, and seniors 6.37 textbooks.

### Oneonta students prefer to purchase a physical copy of textbooks.

Over three-quarters (76.9%) of our students would choose a physical copy for their course textbooks if costs were not considered. One student claimed, "I like physical copies of textbooks to highlight and annotate." Another student explained, "I have a vision impairment, and when books are only offered as an eBook/online I struggle with completing the readings because my vision struggles..."

Despite their stated preference for printed textbooks, students seem to be choosing whichever format is cheapest. For example, the rental market (for both print and digital rentals) is popular. The 2018 Florida survey noticed students were willing to rent digital or printed books to reduce costs. Similarly, our survey shows that 45.6% of our students are likely to rent a print or digital textbook, likely when it is the cheaper option.

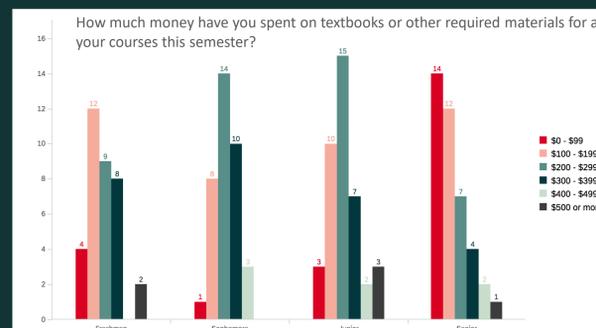
### Required textbooks are not a top source of information for students in their courses.

The survey's results suggest that students are leaning towards digital resources to find answers conveniently. SUNY Oneonta's Blackboard (30%) is the most used source students go to when they have a question about the course content, followed by Google (23%), asking the instructor (22%), and asking other students (9%). Using the required textbook for the course is ranked number six on the list.

We showed earlier that over 60% of our students reported that they had not acquired the required text for a class in the past, which is another reason students may not be relying on their course textbooks for questions about course content. One student wrote that "the marginal utility of the textbooks you assign is negligible when you... make all learning materials available on Blackboard in the form of slides."

### Financial Aid is complicated.

Our study results show that 55% of students said their financial aid doesn't cover any of their textbook expenses. Financial aid comes in different forms such as scholarships, grants, and loans but only covers tuition, room and board. However, the federal and state governments, as well as the college, have programs to fund textbook expenses for students who meet certain criteria, but these programs are limited in scope (NYS Department of Education, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The survey indicates fewer than 10% of the respondents claimed that some percentage of their books were covered by financial aid.



"It is very stressful on my bank account when I buy multiple books for a course, and only need to read 1-4 chapters from each book."

## Discussion

As students ourselves, we were interested in other students' experiences with textbooks and materials for their courses. Our research has been able to provide us with valuable information from the students informing us that they are cost conscience and avoid spending full price for their books where there are alternatives.

The information we have gathered directly impacts the OER Initiative at SUNY Oneonta. Almost half (48.2%) of our respondents said they were provided free or low-cost textbooks or course materials for at least one class this semester.

Based on survey, we encourage the SUNY OER team continue to recruit more faculty to use more open resources in their classes. The survey results also show that printed textbooks are valued in the student community, and the OER initiative should continue to ask faculty to provide a printed option when offering a digital OER textbook.

SUNY Oneonta's OER Initiative will continue this survey every year to gauge the student textbook experience and well as commentary on improving learning material. Our OER initiative will improve the awareness of cost-effective options and accessibility. As we observe and listen to feedback this will improve the faculty and student relationship.

Learn more about SUNY Oneonta's OER Initiative at <https://libguides.oneonta.edu/oer>.

## References

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