

Undergraduate Student Perspectives on Textbook Costs and Implications for Academic Success

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Abstract

To provide more affordable course content to our students and faculty, local data on how students perceive textbook expenses and how the costs impact student success would be necessary in order to advocate to faculty and other stakeholders. This survey, conducted at a mid-sized research public institution, aims to explore student perceptions of textbooks and how these perceptions influence academic success. The results reveal that students feel that the cost of required textbooks is unreasonable and that students are more likely to purchase required textbooks for in-major classes than for elective or general education courses. The most common means of reducing costs are purchasing from a vendor other than the campus bookstore, renting, or sharing books with classmates. Implications for academic success included not purchasing required textbooks or withdrawing from a course due to not having the materials. Students whose majors are housed in the College of Business have the highest textbook costs.

Keywords: Textbook costs, Affordable course content, Open Educational Resources, Undergraduate students, Academic Library

Introduction

In the early stages of a grassroots movement to promote the use of Open Educational Resources (OER) to faculty at our University –Old Dominion University–, we knew that local data would be necessary in making a case to faculty and administrators about how the use of OER could improve the educational experience of our students. Providing national statistics about the rising cost of textbooks and sharing data from longitudinal studies is useful to begin a conversation, but providing local data about student perceptions can assist with gaining buy-in from faculty and administrators and to build interest in use of OER or Affordable Course Content (ACC) instead of using traditional course materials. The goal of this study was to gain insight into the student experience at our institution, Old Dominion University, a mid-sized research university located in Norfolk, Virginia.

Old Dominion University is unique in several ways. An average of 800 students per year transfer to our institution from a nearby community college, which was one of the original leaders in implementing OER courses. We are also located within the same metropolitan as the largest Navy base in the world, and have a large military presence within our student population, including active duty, veterans, and spouses, as well as more non-traditional students than many of our peer institutions or institutions represented in large-scale textbook studies. Therefore, presenting data from our own student body would be quite meaningful to our constituents.

This paper presents a study conducted by librarians at Old Dominion University on student perceptions of textbooks and whether the cost of textbooks plays a role in factors related to student success; and to explore how students at our University engage with course materials. While there are studies that examine similar questions, our study is distinctive in that it studies one specific and unique population. While the results contribute to the growing body of international research on this topic, they are also useful to the situation at our University.

Literature Review

Numerous publications report on the cost of textbooks and course materials such as access codes that go along with commercial textbooks (Allen, 2010; Carbaugh & Ghosh, 2005), and comparisons of traditional textbooks to Open Educational Resources (OER) as they relate to cost savings and efficacy (Allen, Guzman-Alvarez, Molinaro, & Larsen, 2015; Feldstein et al., 2012; Hilton, 2016). Examining student perceptions of textbook cost is a relatively new endeavor in this area, and much of the focus is on comparing the quality or efficacy of traditional textbooks to OER. There are a handful of studies that explore student perceptions of impact of the cost of course materials on their quality of life; how cost impacts student success; and how students describe their engagement with course materials (Brandle et al., 2019; Martin, Belikov, Hilton, Wiley & Fischer, 2017; Stein, Hart, Keaney & White, 2017).

City University of New York (CUNY) developed a zero textbook program and conducted a survey (N=890) to determine student perceptions of the program (Brandle et al., 2019). Fifty-five percent of participants indicated that the top benefit of the zero textbook program was cost savings. The second highest ranking benefit was ease of access. Indeed, ease of access had an impact on student use of the textbook, as 90% of participants indicated that they accessed the textbook before or during the first week of class (Brandle et al., 2019). When asked to compare ease of access to their traditional textbook courses, 76% indicated that the zero textbook courses provided easier access than traditional textbook courses.

Researchers at Brigham Young University (BYU) sought to learn more about student and faculty perceptions and administered two separate surveys to faculty and students to examine their perceptions of traditional textbook costs and OER (Martin et al., 2017). The student survey, N=676, investigated how students would spend the money saved if they did not have to purchase textbooks, and student perceptions of the impact of textbook cost on their academic success (Martin et al., 2017). The most common responses to how students would spend money saved from not purchasing textbooks were on housing and on food (Martin et al., 2017). The researchers pointed out that the qualitative data collected from the open-ended questions indicated that the ability to spend saved money on housing would contribute to less hours working for students.

Several studies have sought to explore the impact of the cost of course materials on student academic success. The Florida Virtual Campus has conducted two large-scale student surveys on textbooks and course materials, most recently in 2017 (Florida Virtual Campus, 2016). One of the key findings was that the cost of textbooks continues to have a negative impact on student academic achievement and completion rates. Similarly, student participants from the BYU study felt that the cost of textbooks had a negative impact on their academic success, with 66% stating that they had not purchased a textbook because of its price and 47% indicating that not purchasing a textbook had negatively impacted their grade in a course (Martin et al., 2017). Stein et al. (2017) conducted a study

at a university in New Zealand and also found that more than half of their respondents indicated that they felt that the cost of textbooks has had a negative impact on their academic success. The Student Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs) conducted a large-scale survey with 2,039 students from over 150 different universities (Selnack, 2014). Two key findings of this study were that 65% of the participants did not purchase their course materials when the cost was too high and that the cost of textbooks had an impact on how many classes or which specific classes they could take each semester. Jhangiani and Jhangiani (2017) conducted a similar study at a university in Canada and only 27% of respondents indicated that they had taken fewer courses and slightly less than that indicated that they had decided not to register for a course because of textbook costs.

Another growing concern among educators is *how* students engage with their course materials and how lack of engagement results in poor academic performance. A study conducted by Taylor (2011) indicated that regardless of format or course materials, student understanding of content relies on students reading and that this is a primary barrier to student success. Multiple studies on undergraduate students and reading found that students often do not complete their assigned readings for class, and several instructors have redesigned their course structure to better assist students with reading comprehension (Bliss, Hilton, Wiley, & Thanos, 2013; Bliss, Robinson, Hilton & Wiley, 2013; Jensen, 2018; Lieu, Wong, Asefirad & Shaffer, 2017, Berry Cook, Hill, & Stevens, 2010). Jhangiani and Jhangiani (2017) point out that respondents to their survey indicated required textbooks were used about half of the time. Berry et al. (2010) discovered that most students are aware of the importance of reading and its impact on their grades, but still often choose not to complete course readings. Lieu et al. (2017) learned that providing students with structured reading guides for introductory level Biology students had a positive impact on student grades. Participants in the BYU study indicated that they did not always use their textbooks when they did purchase the required textbooks (Martin et al., 2017). Although it is difficult to determine whether or not use of OER has an impact on whether or not students read required materials, Jensen (2018) conducted a survey that investigated student usage of affordable course content and found that 70% of participants indicated that they read more of the required materials that were available online and 67% did so because the resources were free or affordable.

Although these studies discover similar patterns, the different student bodies show different degrees of these patterns. Therefore, we posit that the demographic differences of the student populations make a difference in how students perceive and behave the cost of textbooks, and it is necessary to conduct local studies in order to advise specific institutions on understanding their own student populations.

Methodology

The study was implemented at Old Dominion University. The study was deemed exempt status by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). During the semester of administration there were 15,063 full-time undergraduate students and 4,504 undergraduate students. The researchers used the Florida Virtual Campus Survey 2016 survey as a model for development of their local survey and modified it to meet local needs.

The survey was distributed to a random sample of undergraduate students via link provided in a direct email. Using the Qualtrics software, researchers sent one initial solicitation and two reminder emails, removing students who had already participated each time.

Research Questions

1. How do students at Old Dominion University perceive the cost of course materials?
2. How does the cost of course materials influence student success at Old Dominion University?
3. How do Old Dominion University students engage with course materials?

To investigate the questions of the study, the researchers administered a survey (Appendix A) to a random representative sample of undergraduate students at Old Dominion University (n=489). The researchers used the Florida Virtual Campus 2016 survey as a model in addition to creating original items relevant to the research questions the Old Dominion University population. The survey took place during the last three weeks of the academic semester, and included 19 forced choice and 1 open-ended response items. The survey asked students who had transferred to Old Dominion University from Tidewater Community College to identify themselves and followed-up by inviting these students to participate in a follow up study.

Results

The results section will provide a discussion of the findings; to report on the amount that students spend on course materials, the actions they take to reduce the costs of purchasing these materials, and the consequent impact upon student academic success.

Participant Demographics

Of the 488 participants, two identified themselves as graduate students and 1 as “other.” These three participants were not invited to complete the survey, and 485 undergraduate students completed the survey in its entirety. Figure 1 provides the percentage of survey participants from each academic college at the University compared to the undergraduate full-time enrollment at the University, as reported in 2016. As figure 2 shows, 47% of participants were seniors, 27% were juniors, 14% were sophomores, and 12% were freshman. Over half of the survey participants (58%) indicated that they had transferred to the University from another academic institution and 43% of the participants who indicated that they were transfer students transferred to Old Dominion University from Tidewater Community College.

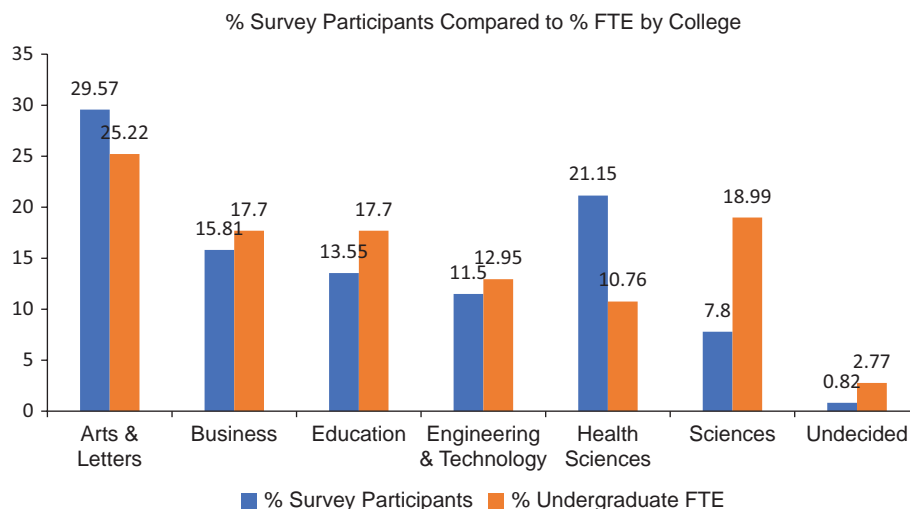


Figure 1: Percentage of Survey Participants Compared to Percentage FTE by College.

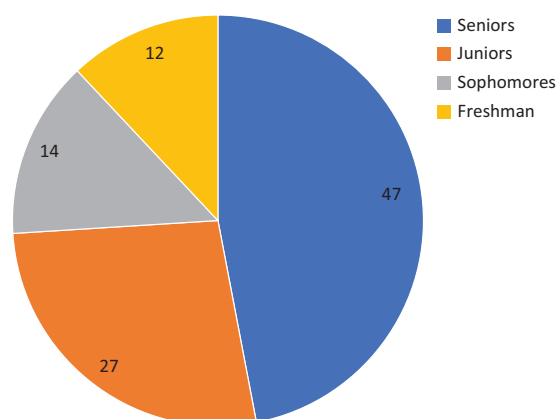


Figure 2: Percentage of Participants by Class Year.

In addition to basic demographic information, the researchers were interested in how many participants were first generation college students, received financial aid or scholarships, participated in a work study program, or had jobs outside of the University (table 1). Participants who reported working, either through a work-study program or outside job were asked how many hours a week they work. Over 34% of working students reported working over 31 hours per week (figure 3).

Transfer students tended to work more hours per week than non-transfer students as about 60% of the transfer students worked more than 31 hours per week, compared with about 25% of non-transfer students. A higher percentage of transfer students (32%) would take fewer courses to offset the cost of textbooks than non-transfer students (21%). However, a much lower percentage of transfer students (57%) would not purchase the required textbooks than non-transfer students (75%).

Table 1: First Generation, Financial Aid, and Employment Information

Which of the following applies to you? (check all that apply)	% of Survey Participants
I am a first generation college student	22.8%
I receive financial aid or scholarships	38.21%
I am part of a work-study program	2.07%
I have a job (or jobs) that is not part of a work-study program	33.03%
None of the above	3.89%

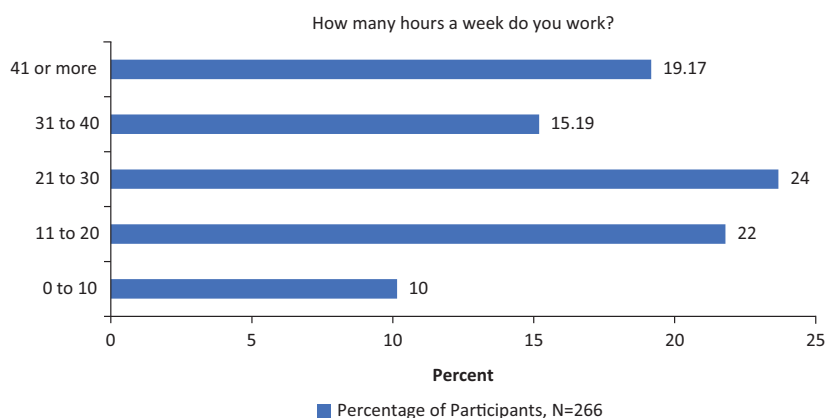


Figure 3: Number of Work Hours per Week as Reported by Employed Participants.

How much are University students spending on course materials and how do they attempt to save money?

The survey asked participants how many courses the participant was enrolled in that semester and how many of those courses required textbooks. The results were as follows (figure 4).

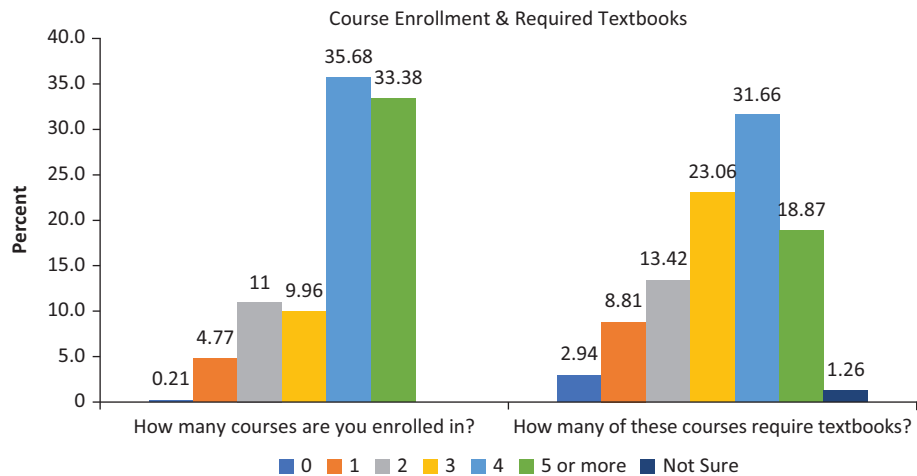


Figure 4: Number of Courses Enrolled in and Number of Required Textbooks Needed.

Most participants reported spending between \$300-\$400 for their course materials during the Spring 2017 semester. Figure 5 provides the breakdown of participant spending on course materials. When asked how reasonable or unreasonable participants felt the amount that they spent on course materials was, 75% selected *extremely unreasonable* or *somewhat unreasonable* (figure 6).

Chi-Square statistical analysis shows that there is a statistically significant relationship (X^2 (20, $N= 447$) = 0.01, $p = .05$) between how many courses respondents enrolled in in Spring 2017 and the class year they were currently in. While 90% of the Freshman respondents ($n= 50$) enrolled in 4 or more courses, only about 63% of the Senior respondents ($n=209$) enrolled in 4 or more courses. In fact, 86% of the sophomore ($n= 64$), and 75% of the juniors ($n=122$) follow the pattern of the higher the students' class years, the lower percentage of them enrolled in 4 or more courses.

The data reveals that out of all the colleges, the highest percentage of students in the College of Business (82%) reported that they found that the amount they had to spend on purchasing course materials were either somewhat or extremely unreasonable. The percentage of students who shared these sentiments were all lower at other colleges: the College of Health Sciences (75%); College of

Engineering and Technology (74%); College of Arts & Letters (74%); College of Education (73%); College of Sciences (73%).

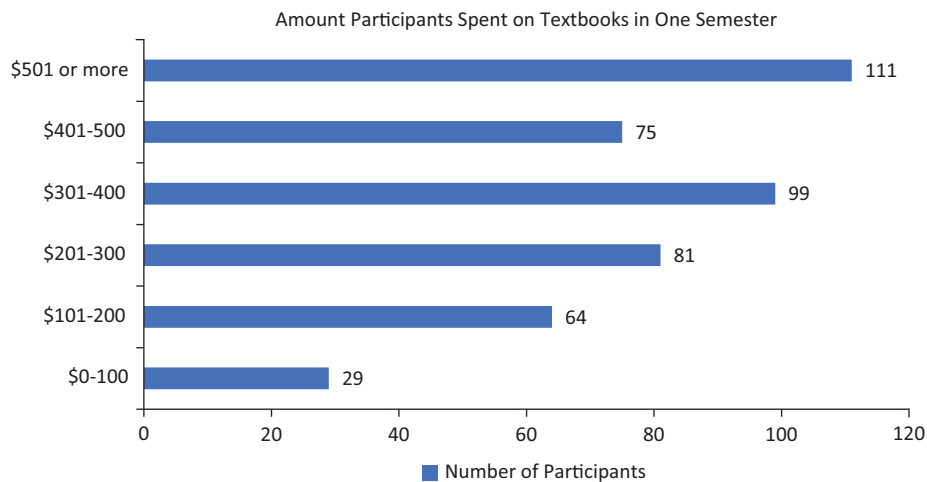


Figure 5: Amount spent on course materials, Spring 2017.

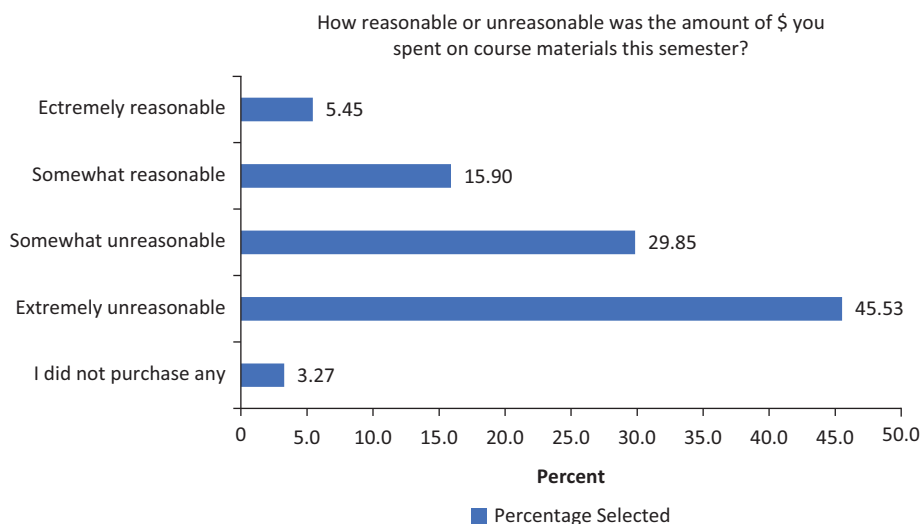


Figure 6: Student Perception of Textbook Costs.

The results of the survey compared how much participants budgeted for their course materials in Spring 2017 to how much participants actually paid. Participants on the lower-end of cost, the zero to \$300 range, budgeted more than they actually paid. Students who paid over \$300 for course materials budgeted less than they actually paid (figure 7). Key findings from the survey indicate that

46% of all respondents (n =455) felt that the cost of textbooks was extremely unreasonable. The highest percentage of respondents (26%, n =118) reported paying between \$300-\$400 for course materials in Spring 2017.

There is a significant relationship between how much students budget for course materials each semester and how reasonable or unreasonable they felt about the amount spent. ($\chi^2(20, N = 455) = 0.00, P = .05$) We found that, the more students budgeted each semester, the more unreasonable they found the amount they had to spend. Of the respondents who budgeted \$501 or more per semester, two-third of them felt that the amount was *extremely unreasonable*. Comparatively, for respondents who budgeted \$200 or less, only about 35% of them felt the same way.

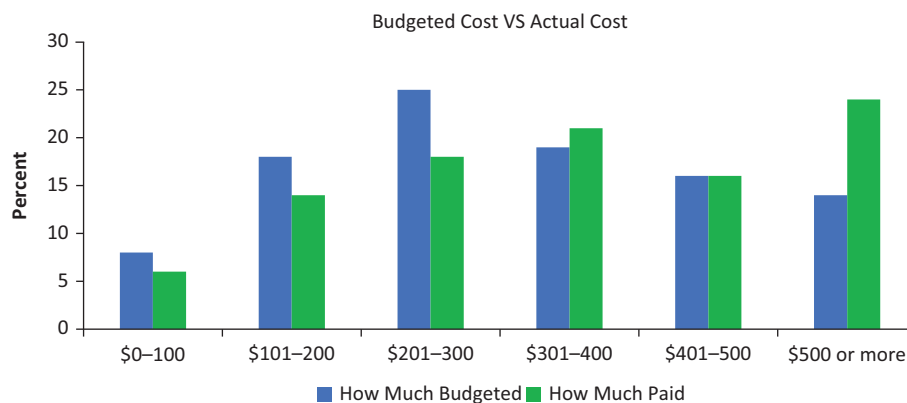


Figure 7: Budgeted cost Versus Actual Spending.

Finally, the survey sought to determine how the University students save money on course materials by prompting students to select what actions they take to reduce costs. The most common way for participants to save money on course materials is to buy their books somewhere other than the campus bookstore (30%), followed by renting printed textbooks (20%). Only about 3% of respondents indicated that they did not attempt to reduce the cost of their assigned course materials (table 2).

Table 2: What actions do University students take to reduce the cost of course materials?

What are the top three actions you have taken to reduce required course materials cost? (select up to three)	% of Participants
Buy books from somewhere other than the campus bookstore	29.68%
Rent printed textbooks	20.32%
Rent digital textbooks	13.94%
Buy used copies from the campus bookstore	13.58%
Share books with classmates	9.80%
Check to see if the /// Libraries have the required textbook	4.23%
Other	2.70%
Rent only the digital textbook chapters needed for the course	2.34%

I do not attempt to reduce costs	1.44%
Buy lifetime access to a digital version of a textbook	1.08%
Use a reserve copy from the /// Libraries	.90%

Impact on Academic Success

The survey explored possible impacts of cost of course materials on student success by asking participants if they had taken specific actions based on the cost of course materials. Thirty-eight percent of participants indicated that they had chosen not to purchase required course materials due to cost and 20% indicated that they had received a lower grade than expected in a course because they could not afford to purchase the course materials (figure 8).

Participants who selected *drop or withdraw a course* were asked a follow-up question to determine how often they drop or withdraw from courses in general. Twenty-eight percent of participants who answered the follow-up question indicated that they had only dropped one course due to cost. Thirty-six percent indicated that they dropped courses occasionally due to cost, and 36% indicated that they regularly dropped courses due to cost. A higher percentage of students in the College of Business (12%) dropped or withdrew from a course due to the cost of textbooks than students in other colleges. About 9% of students in College of Health Sciences; and 7% of students in the College of Sciences dropped or withdrew.

Over 20% of students in four of the colleges (College of Arts and Letters; College of Education; College of Engineering; and College of Sciences) reported that earned a lower grade than expected in a course because they could not afford to buy the course materials.

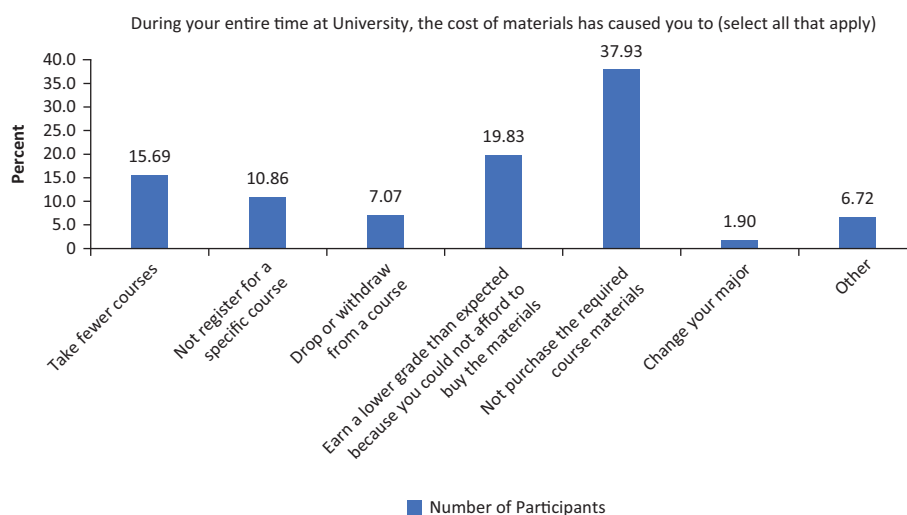


Figure 8: The cost of materials has caused students to...

The survey also investigated student perceptions of the necessity of having the course materials. We sought to find out whether there was a difference in perception based on whether or not the materials were required, supplementary, for a course within the major, or for a general education or elective course (figure 9). While 41% (n=183) of all respondents (n = 449) rated it extremely necessary to have the required textbook in order to succeed in a course in general, a higher number

of respondents (58%, n= 262) have the same rating for courses in their major. There are significant relationships between the college of the students' and their rating for required textbook necessity to succeed in both general courses ($X^2(18, N = 449) = 0.02, P = .05$), and courses in their major ($X^2(18, N = 449) = 0.00, P = .05$).

The highest percentage of students in the College of Health Sciences (67%, n = 65) felt that having the required textbook extremely necessary to succeed in courses in their major; while the College of Sciences has the lowest percentage (44%, n =14). However, the College of Education has the highest percentage of students (48%, n =24) who found it extremely necessary to have the required textbook in order to succeed in a course outside of their major; and once again the College of Sciences has the lowest percentage (31%, n=10).

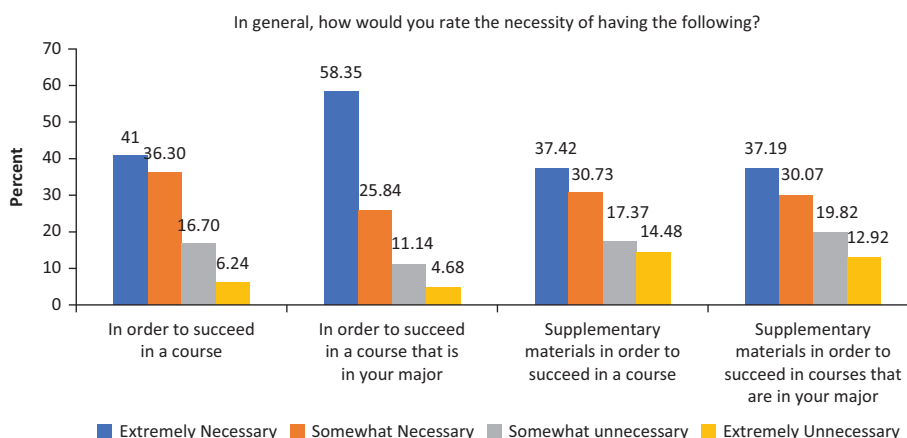


Figure 9: Student perceptions of the necessity of having course materials

Practical Implications and Conclusions

We posit that student demographics have an effect on how students perceive the cost of course materials. One key finding from the study was how much time our student worked outside of class. A high percentage of our working students worked over 31 hours per week. When asked how they usually pay for their course materials each semester, the most selected answer (61%) was students using money earned from a work-study or outside job. It is therefore likely that students who have to work and have to use their work earnings on course materials would be more sensitive to the cost than those who do not work. In addition, more of our transfer students worked 31 or hours per week than our non-transfer students. With many of our transfer students coming from Tidewater Community College that heavily features z-courses (courses that only use OER), the transfer student population might be the most affected by the cost of textbooks. For future directions, we will reach out to transfer students, especially those from Tidewater Community College who completed their study without having to pay for textbooks (z-degree), and explore their perceptions of now having to pay for course materials at our university, and how they handle the new financial burden. The results from this study make us realize some of the obstacles these student face, and we can develop services for them to help the university's retention effort.

Our results show that the more courses a student takes, the more they budget and spent for course materials. Naturally, the more they budgeted, the more they perceived their expenses on course materials as unreasonable. However, the discipline the students belong to also makes a difference in how they perceive the cost. For instance, business students were by far the most unsatisfied with the cost of course materials A higher percentage of our business students report paying \$500 or

more for their books than any other college. So, it was not surprising to find that a higher percentage of students in the College of Business (12%) dropped or withdrew from a course due to the cost of textbooks than students in other colleges.

We found that over a third of the participants indicated that they had chosen not to purchase required course materials due to cost and about one-fifth of them indicated that they had received a lower grade than expected in a course because they could not afford to purchase the course materials. Furthermore, many students have dropped or withdrawn from courses due to the cost of the course materials. This suggests that the negative perception of textbook expenses could lead to negative impact on student grades and course completions, and potentially lead to negative impact on overall retention. With this information, the library could work specifically with the College of Business as well as the other Colleges to offer more library licensed materials for their courses in order to lower their students' expenses.

Most respondents buy books from somewhere else other than the campus bookstore, they also rent or buy digital or used books. Twenty-four percent said that they shared books with classmates, and only about 10% checked to see if the Libraries have their textbooks. Only about 3% of respondents said that they did not attempt to reduce their textbooks costs. This has serious practical implication for the campus bookstore as they will need to modify their current business model. One possible future direction is to bring the campus bookstore into the conversation. Instead of treating it as a zero-sum game, it could be more productive to work with the bookstore to help student ease their textbook expense challenges.

We also learned that very few students were finding their textbooks on reserve at the Libraries, so this tells us that we could do a better job of marketing this service to students and faculty. Some of these methods for reducing costs could have an impact on student academic achievement. For example, if students are renting books or single chapters, this means that they will no longer have access to that information after the semester is over. If they are sharing books, this could cause problems if everyone has a test or assignment due at the same time.

The data reveals that students found it necessary to have the required textbooks in the courses of their major in order to succeed. This could mean that the students are more inclined to purchase textbooks for their major courses than for courses not in their major. As the highest percentage of students in the College of Health Sciences (67%, $n = 65$) felt that having the required textbook extremely necessary to succeed in courses in their major, the practical implication is for us to target those courses to offer more affordable options for their faculty and students. However, the results could also suggest that students would rather spend their money on textbooks for their major courses, thus not spend as much for non-major courses which they deem not as necessary. In this case, the practical implication for the libraries is to focus on the general education courses, which have large enrollments, to have the most impact on easing the financial burden as well as helping student success.

Although the cost of textbooks is relatively small in comparison to the other costs of higher education such as tuition and housing, student access to and engagement with course materials is essential to academic achievement. Communication and collaboration across university departments and disciplines is key to easing this burden for students and improving their educational experience. Faculty are responsible for the selection and implementation of course materials. Partners such as academic libraries, faculty development, and university administration can support faculty in course design by providing professional development, training, and incentives. Finally, including students in conversations about their experiences with and perceptions of course materials is essential to learning about how to best help them succeed. Sharing local stories and data from studies such as

this one can help to contextualize the broader concerns with the rising cost of textbooks and how it connects to student learning.

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Appendix A

Student Textbook Survey

Q1 Which of these categories best defines you?

- Undergraduate Student (1)
- Graduate Student (2)
- Non-degree Student (3)
- Other (4)

Q2 How many courses are you enrolled in **this semester**?

- 0 (1)
- 1 (2)
- 2 (3)
- 3 (4)
- 4 (5)
- 5 or more (6)

Q3 How many of these courses have required textbooks?

- 0 (1)
- 1 (2)
- 2 (3)
- 3 (4)
- 4 (5)
- 5 or more (6)
- I am not sure (7)

Q4 How much do you estimate the cost of the course materials (including textbooks, course packets, access codes, and other print or digital learning materials) for ALL of your courses **this semester**?

- \$0-100 (1)
- \$101-200 (2)
- \$201-300 (3)
- \$301-400 (4)
- \$401-500 (5)
- \$501 or more (6)

Q5 How reasonable or unreasonable was the amount of money you spent on course materials **this semester**?

- Extremely reasonable (1)
- Somewhat reasonable (2)
- Somewhat unreasonable (3)
- Extremely unreasonable (4)
- I did not purchase course materials this semester (5)

Q6 How much do you budget for course materials **each semester**?

- \$0-100 (1)
- \$101-200 (2)
- \$201-300 (3)
- \$301-400 (4)
- \$401-500 (5)
- \$501 or more (6)

Q7 How do you usually pay for your course materials **each semester**? (Check all that apply)

- I use my own money earned from a work study or outside job (1)
- I use non-loan awarded money (Examples: Pell Grant, Scholarships, GI Bill) (2)
- I use money from student loans (3)
- My parents pay for my textbooks (4)
- Other (5) _____

Q8 During your **entire time at III**, the cost of materials for a course has caused you to (check all that apply):

- Take fewer courses (1)
- Not register for a specific course (2)
- Drop or withdraw from a course (3)
- Earn a lower grade than you expected in a course because you could not afford to buy the course materials (4)
- Not purchase the required textbook (5)
- Change your major (6)
- Other (7) _____
- None of the above (8)

Q9 How often do you drop or withdraw from a course in general?

Q10 What are the top three actions you have taken to reduce required course materials costs?

(Select up to three)

- I do not attempt to reduce textbook costs (1)
- Buy used copies from the campus bookstore (2)
- Buy books from somewhere other than the campus bookstore (3)
- Rent digital textbooks (4)
- Buy lifetime access to a digital version of a textbook (5)

- Rent only the digital textbook chapters needed for the course (6)
- Rent printed textbooks (7)
- Check to see if ODU Libraries have the required textbook (8)
- Use a reserve copy from the ODU Libraries (9)
- Share books with classmates (10)
- Other (please specify) (11)

Q11 In general, how would you rate the necessity of having the following?

	Extremely necessary (1)	Somewhat necessary (2)	Somewhat unnecessary (3)	Extremely unnecessary (4)
The required textbook in order to succeed in a course (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The required textbook for a class that is in your major in order to succeed in a course (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Supplementary materials (online access codes, recommended/not required materials) in order to succeed in course (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Supplementary materials (online access codes, recommended/not required materials) in order to succeed in courses that are in your major (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q12 What class year are you currently in?

- Senior (1)
- Junior (2)
- Sophomore (3)
- Freshman (4)
- Other (5) _____

Q13 In what College is your major? (select from drop down)

- College of Arts & Letters
- College of Business
- College of Education & Professional Studies
- College of Engineering
- College of Health Sciences
- College of Sciences
- Unknown or Other

Q14 Which of the following applies to you? (Check all that apply)

- I am a first generation college student (1)
- I receive financial aid or scholarships (2)
- I am part of a work-study program (3)
- I have a job (or jobs) that is not part of a work-study program (4)
- None of the above (5)

Q15 How many hours a week do you work?

- 0-10 (1)
- 11-20 (2)
- 21-30 (3)
- 31-40 (4)
- 41 or more (5)

Q16 Are you a transfer student?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q17 Did you transfer to /// from ///

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q18 If you transferred to ODU from TCC, we are interested in learning more about your experiences at both institutions. Would you be interested in participating in a brief follow-up study?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q19 If you are interested in participating in our follow-up study, we will contact you via email. Your information will remain protected and anonymous. Please enter your email:
