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What's Up with Textbooks?

Janelle Wertzberger
Gettysburg College

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What's Up with Textbooks?

Abstract

Presentation at a faculty meeting on textbook costs and actions that instructors can take to improve student learning

Keywords

textbooks, OER, open textbooks, textbook costs

Disciplines

Scholarly Communication

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What's up with textbooks?



Created by Matt Hawdon
from Noun Project

Gettysburg College Faculty Meeting
December 5, 2019
Janelle Wertzberger, Musselman Library

I thank Bob and the Faculty Council for inviting me to speak about textbook costs and open source alternatives today. I know that this issue is of special interest to Bob as he thinks about various factors that influence student well-being, retention, graduation rate, and so on. I have lots of thoughts, but I want to begin by centering student voices. You all probably have some idea that textbooks are expensive. But “expensive” is relative, and our perspectives tend to change over time.



Last March during Open Education Week, we asked students what they think about textbook prices. Here are some things they wrote.

infinitely
↑
I spend 4x the worth of my soul each semester.
W.O.A.T.
Way too expensive!
ABSURD.
School is
"Know
and
W
pensive!
even
them
Sad.
LMAO
We pay
enough
here already...
Insensitive
to students.

A wise man once said,
"no money, no problems"

Thanks to textbooks now I have no problems.

WACK

Sin

They should be
included in tuition for
how much we already pay.

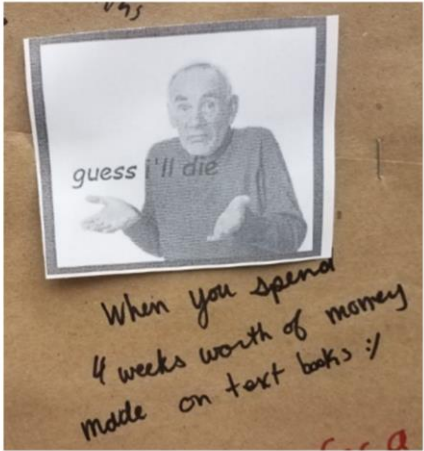
↑ Amen

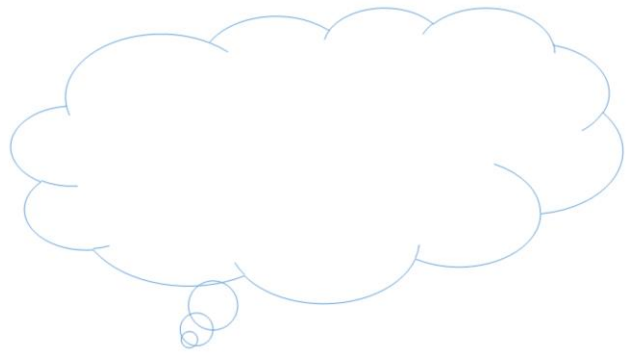
Just
why??

Day 1
Tuition is already expensive enough
← True
← TRUE
- TRUE
Wack

* They SUCK, and so do the textbook companies.

My Pell Grant doesn't cover this shit.
A LOAD OF BS!





What is going on here?

Textbook prices are higher now than when you bought them.

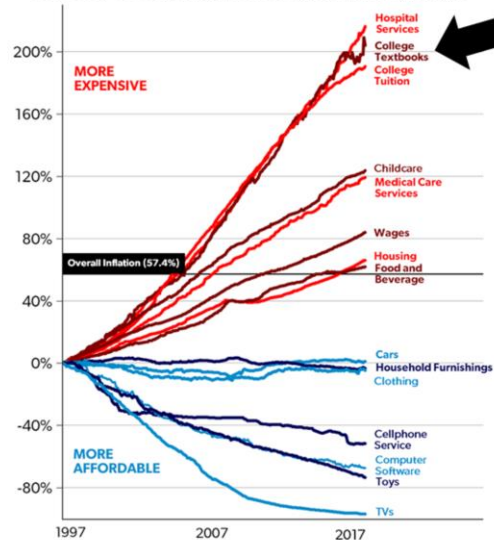
1997-2017

Textbooks up more than 200%

Textbook cost rising faster than college tuition

Overall inflation: 57%

Price Changes (January 1997 to June 2018)
Selected US Consumer Goods and Services, Wages



Source: BLS

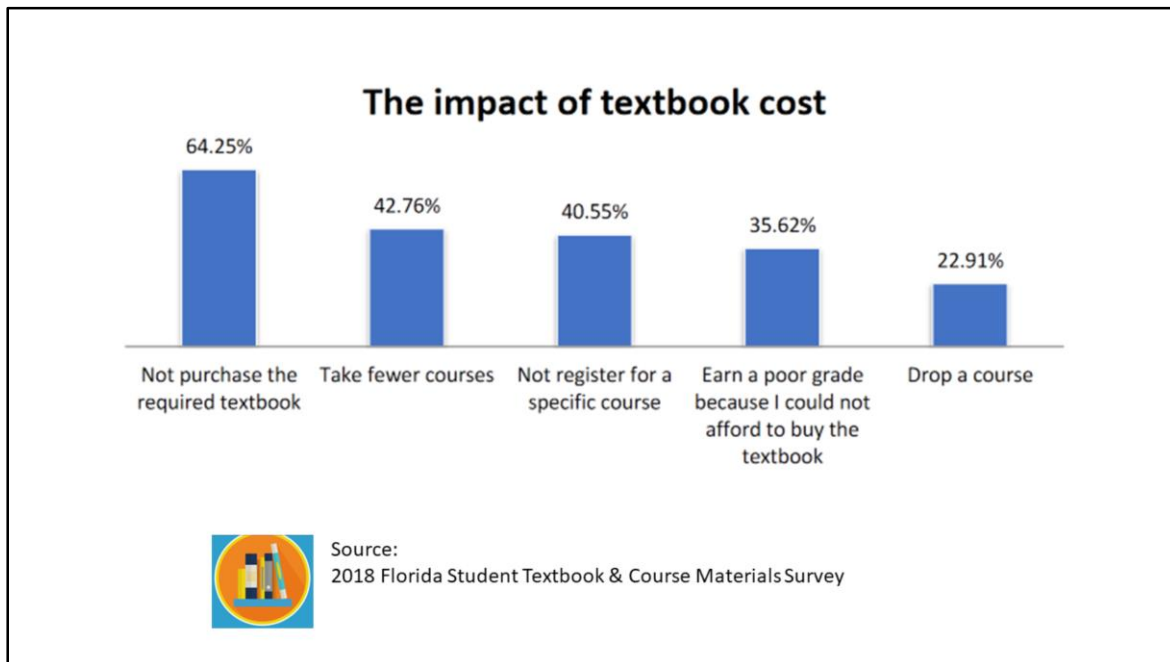
Carpe Diem AEI

These data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show how prices have changed in the past 20 years. Note that college textbooks and college tuition are way up top – the only thing that tops them is hospital services. Inflation over this time period has been about 57%, but textbook prices are up more than 200%.

Source: <https://www.aei.org/publication/the-chart-of-the-century-makes-the-rounds-at-the-federal-reserve/>

How does book cost impact student success?

The prices are alarming, but what really matters is how they affect student learning.



These data are from a statewide survey of over 24,000 college students in Florida and they show what happens to students when book prices are too high. High prices can prompt students to not acquire the required course materials, take fewer courses, avoid certain courses, earn a poor grade, or drop a course.. Note the bar at the far left – over 64% of surveyed students have not purchased a required textbook.

If you’ve ever been frustrated that your students don’t seem to have their books the first week of class (or the second week, or the last week...), price might be a factor. If your students are struggling in your course, book cost MIGHT be a factor. It’s worth exploring.

Source:

<https://dlss.flvc.org/documents/210036/1314923/2018+Student+Textbook+and+Course+Materials+Survey+Report+---+FINAL+VERSION+---+20190308.pdf/07478d85-89c2-3742-209a-9cc5df8cd7ea>

What is “affordable”?

Other textbook affordability programs:

\$40

per course

Gettysburg College students say:

\$50

per course

This begs the question: what is affordable? Many institutions have textbook affordability programs now because they know book costs influence student success. Often, these programs encourage professors to create zero-cost or low-cost courses. But what is “low cost” and what is “affordable”?

The number that textbook affordability advocates are coalescing around is \$40. We surveyed Gettysburg students earlier this semester and asked them what they thought was a reasonable cost for all books and required course materials – the median is \$50 per course. (You can hear more about the results of that survey at a Friday Forum in February 2020.)

OER: Open Educational Resources



For many professors, the most feasible approach to get to \$0 (or close to it) is to adopt an Open Educational Resource, or OER. OER are completely free to access online, which means you can use them as an EQUITY STRATEGY to ensure that all students have equal access to your learning materials at a price that can't be beat. There are other ways you can reduce the cost of your course materials, but OER are truly zero cost.

There will be additional opportunities to learn about finding and adopting OER in the spring semester. For now, I'll just say that there are OER available for subjects from the arts and humanities to STEM fields. Some are full textbooks and some are smaller objects. And there are more available all the time. For now, don't get stuck on whether there are OER available for your courses. Instead, consider what kind of impact they could have on your classroom.

University of Georgia

Change from non-OER to OER

	Δ Grade	Δ DFW
Non-Pell eligible students	+7.4%	-2.05%
Pell eligible students	+12.3%	-4.43%
All Students	+8.6%	-2.68%

Colvard, N. B., Watson, C. E., & Park, H. (2018). The Impact of Open Educational Resources on Various Student Success Metrics. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 30(2), 262–276.

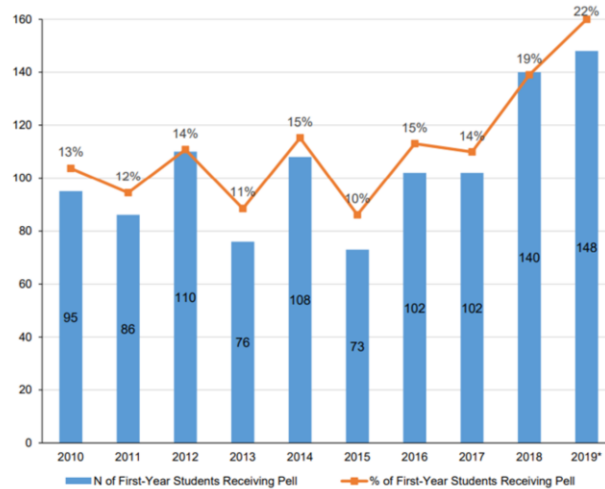
This recent study from the University of Georgia shows that while all students benefit from courses shifting from commercial textbooks to OER (with better grades and lower rates of Ds, Fs, and withdrawals), Pell-eligible students benefit the most.

And who are Pell students? The federal government says “students with exceptional financial need” are eligible for Pell, which is kind of vague. Other sources say students with family household income below \$50,000/year are eligible, but most Pell grants go to students with family income under \$20,000/year (source: <https://www.scholarships.com/financial-aid/grants/federal-grants/>)

Students from households with this level of family income are among our most vulnerable. These are the students who are likely to struggle with buying a \$100 or \$200 book for one class (or six \$15 books for one class).

How many Pell students are in your classes?

Pell Grant Recipients in the First-Year Cohort



Source: https://www.gettysburg.edu/offices/institutional-analysis/pdfs/public-fact-book/2020/PellRecipients_2019.pdf

This graph is from the Gettysburg College Fact Book. This semester, 148 first-year students have Pell grants. That's 22% of the first year class.

In our entire student body, 18% of all students have Pell grants (**according to our Financial Aid Director**).

Given the changing demographics of college-bound students, that line is likely to continue shooting upward. The challenge is becoming more acute.

OER: Free + Permissions

Permissions =
copy, share, edit,
mix, keep, use



In addition to being a fantastic equity strategy, using OER can also be a SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY for instructors. Many faculty switch to OER because they see little value in the updates commercial publishers push out with each new edition, especially in the context of price increases. Or they know things are missing from commercial textbooks. Or they want to customize their course by relying less on a single commercial text and bringing in additional materials. They want the academic freedom to fully control their readings and other learning materials, to change them how and when they want to change them rather than when commercial publishers do. In short, many faculty switch to OER for the pedagogical benefits. In addition to being free of charge, OER are free of most copyright restrictions, meaning it is legal to print, reuse, revise, and remix them. They are ideal for faculty who don't teach the textbook exactly the way it was written and like to put their own spin on the course. These benefits, coupled with the impact on student learning, make OER especially strategic because they have the potential to create systemic, long term change in your courses.

Five things YOU can do

I hope you are now feeling both more aware of the structural elements that can negatively affect our students AND more aware of how you can influence them. The good news is that YOU are a big part of the structure of college, and there are things you can do that positively impact the financial experience of being a college student and also enhance the way you teach your classes. I'm short on time, so here's a short list of things you can do.

1

Know how much your books cost

The first is about awareness and empathy. Look up your book costs on the bookstore website and amazon, just like your students do. Prices may have inflated since you last checked.

Share a cost estimate with your students, in advance if possible. This eliminates surprises.

The best way to be transparent about your course materials is to report them all to the bookstore, which is the one place where all students can see the total cost of taking the course (whether or not they buy them there). This is especially important for students who can't afford books at the beginning of the semester. They can charge books to their student account if they get them from the bookstore. This is essentially a short term, zero interest loan that can be paid off during the course of the semester. Remember, not every student has a credit card and a Prime membership. You may find it effortless to order from amazon, but it's not universally easier for our students.

And if you have a zero cost course, tell the bookstore that, too. You want your students to see a message indicating that there are no books to buy, not a message indicating that the bookstore hasn't heard from the professor.

2

Ask students about your books

The next item is about understanding the student experience. Ask them questions about your books, like:

Did you get all of the assigned materials?

How much did you pay?

Did you buy or rent?

Digital or print? Did you get the format you actually prefer, or the one that was cheapest?

If you didn't get all the books, which ones and why? How did you cope? Did you share books? Use pirated copies? Rely on library books, interlibrary loan, or reserves?

Something else?

This level of detail is beyond the scope of the standard course evaluation, but you could create another survey. Consider doing this as a department instead of instructor by instructor.

3

Talk with colleagues

Some Gettysburg professors using OER: Andresen, Bernard, Birch, Brandauer, Clarke, Glass, Kann, Lochman, Principato, Puckett, Selvaraj, Standlee

Let us know if we missed you!

This next item is about using your network of colleagues.

Compare your course costs and experiences. Who is using an open textbook or OER now? How is that going? You can include colleagues beyond Gettysburg here.

Many courses have multiple sections taught at the same time – how do costs compare across them and can they be lowered?

Maybe you can team up to write, amend, or adapt an open textbook that already exists. Maybe you do that with Gettysburg colleagues, or contacts at other institutions.

If you want to think about a larger change within your department, consider applying for the Change Making Grant from JCCTL.

4

Evaluate an open textbook in your field



**Open Textbook
Library**

open.umn.edu/opentextbooks

Here's something you can do that might result in a change to your course: evaluate an open textbook you might use. If you want to search for open textbooks, I recommend starting with the Open Textbook Library site from the University of Minnesota. It includes reviews by professors just like you. Actually, it includes reviews written by 16 of you earlier this year. We are hoping to continue this opportunity next semester so if you missed out last February, stay tuned.

If you'd like to focus your time on evaluating potential course materials rather than hunting for them, outsource the search to a friendly librarian. Only you can decide if a source will support your course learning goals, but we can jump start that process by sending you a short list of titles to look at.

5

Indicate interest (right now!)

bit.ly/GCtextbook



Created by Adrien Coquet
from Noun Project

This is the last thing and you can do it right now. You all have your devices fired up already so I invite you to pull them out. This link will take you to a very short google form. If you want to know more or even ask us to create a short list of titles for you to evaluate, you can do that in the form. This does not have to be homework. Your to-do lists are very long right now. If you're the least bit curious or enthused in this moment, complete the short form right now. We'll follow up with you at a less nutty time (like January).

Thank you!

Questions? Email OER@gettysburg.edu

Slides: cupola.gettysburg.edu/librarypubs/127



by Janelle Wertzberger

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I thank the Faculty Council and President Uiliano for the invitation to speak today.