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W&M Student Textbook Survey Executive Summary

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Student Textbook Survey Results February 2020

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Executive Summary

In the 2018-2019 academic year, several conversations with key administrators and staff were held on textbook affordability, and the need to address it at William & Mary. These meetings served as the start of a cross-campus discussion. An effort had begun a few years earlier with the library, which presented Open Textbook Network (OTN) workshops sponsored by the Virtual Library of Virginia (VIVA) and with the goal of increasing awareness of Open Education Resources (OER) and exposure to them.

Similar to conversations being held at higher education institutions across the country, the increasing challenge of the cost of attending W&M has come up repeatedly and at the highest level of W&M governance for the past several years. Further, national estimates of textbook costs indicated that they ran to about \$1200 annually, with implications as barriers to student success, particularly college completion, so this effort to understand more about W&M textbook spending was closely aligned with the larger conversation on costs and how they impact student success.

The main objectives for issuing the textbook survey in fall 2019 were to understand the textbook spending practices as well as related preferences of W&M students so that the campus administrators would have information useful for programs designed to increase course materials affordability. Specifically, survey objectives were to:

- Understand current costs of textbooks and course materials for W&M students
- Understand methods W&M students take to lower textbook costs
- Understand the viability of implementing an “inclusive access” textbook pilot
- Identify student suggestions for reducing textbook costs

Summary of Key Findings

Key Finding 1 Spending (textbooks + course materials)

Overall, students are not purchasing all of the textbooks required for their classes. Overall, 48.3% of students (46% of undergraduates, 53% of graduates) reported that their textbooks cost more than \$300, whereas only 24.2% of total respondents (20% of undergraduates, 35% of graduates) reported actually spending that much. Course materials (excluding textbooks) were an additional layout. Over 30% of respondents indicated that they spent more than \$100 on required course materials that semester. Further, while a majority (56%) indicated that for the past year, they “always” (80% of the time or more) purchased the required textbooks assigned, a surprising 39.2% of students indicated that they purchased required materials less than 80% of the time.

Key Finding 2 Financial aid

Of those indicating that they received financial aid, only 9% of them said that it covered all of their textbook and course materials costs. Nearly 36% said that financial aid did not cover *any* of their textbook and course materials costs.

Key Finding 3 Repercussions of high textbook costs

Students acted in a variety of ways to deal with high textbook and course materials costs. More than a third (37.1 %) indicated that in their academic career, they did not purchase a required textbook due to the cost. A surprising amount (11.7%) indicated that they did not register for a specific course due to textbook costs. Further, 7.8% dropped a course, 6.6% earned a poor grade and 3.4% of students indicated that they took fewer courses due to textbook costs.

Key Finding 4 Strategies students take to deal with costs

W&M students reported that in the past year, only 55.4% “always” (more than 80% of the time or more) purchased the required textbooks and course materials. As for strategies for addressing textbook costs, students’ most commonly reported method (20.3%) was purchasing their textbooks from a source other than the campus bookstore. This was followed by purchasing used copies (12.8%), downloading books from the Internet (12.9%) and renting printed textbooks (12.5%).

Key Finding 5 Print preference

Repeatedly, W&M students indicated a strong preference for print format. When asked, 78.4% of students said that they prefer a “physical hard copy” when accessing required textbooks. This trend was less pronounced for optional textbooks (48.3%). Half of undergraduates stated that they had no preference between print or digital formats for a textbook rental program if it saved them money, but graduate students were again strongly in favor of print format if they were even open to a rental program in the first place. (Undergraduates stated that 82% of them would be willing to rent whereas only 47% of graduate or professional students would be willing to rent.)

Key Finding 6 Student suggestions for reducing textbook costs

Students offered a number of suggestions for ways to bring down textbook costs. The top 5 categories of suggestions reported were (in order from most to least mentioned):

- Faculty reconsideration of content marked as required (Distinguish between “essential” vs “useful”)
- More faculty adoption of Open Educational Resources (OER)
- Faculty acceptance of use of older textbook editions
- Greater availability of inexpensive options at the campus bookstore
- Use of library services (course reserves and general circulating collection, interlibrary loan)