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## "I spent my whole summer's wages... on books alone": Gettysburg College Student Textbook and Course Materials Survey

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## "I spent my whole summer's wages... on books alone": Gettysburg College Student Textbook and Course Materials Survey

### Abstract

We've all heard stories of students struggling with textbook costs, but how do our students cope when the price gets too high? Modeled after the Student Textbook and Course Materials Survey conducted by Florida Virtual Campus, Musselman Library's course materials survey sought to uncover how textbook costs impact the success of Gettysburg College students. Results give insight into participants' perceptions of how much money they spend, the strategies they use to reduce costs, and the effects of the cost of course materials on their academic success. Attendees will leave the presentation with a greater understanding of the whole Gettysburg College community and ideas for next steps.

### Keywords

college textbooks, textbook costs, textbook affordability, student success, Gettysburg College

### Disciplines

Scholarly Communication

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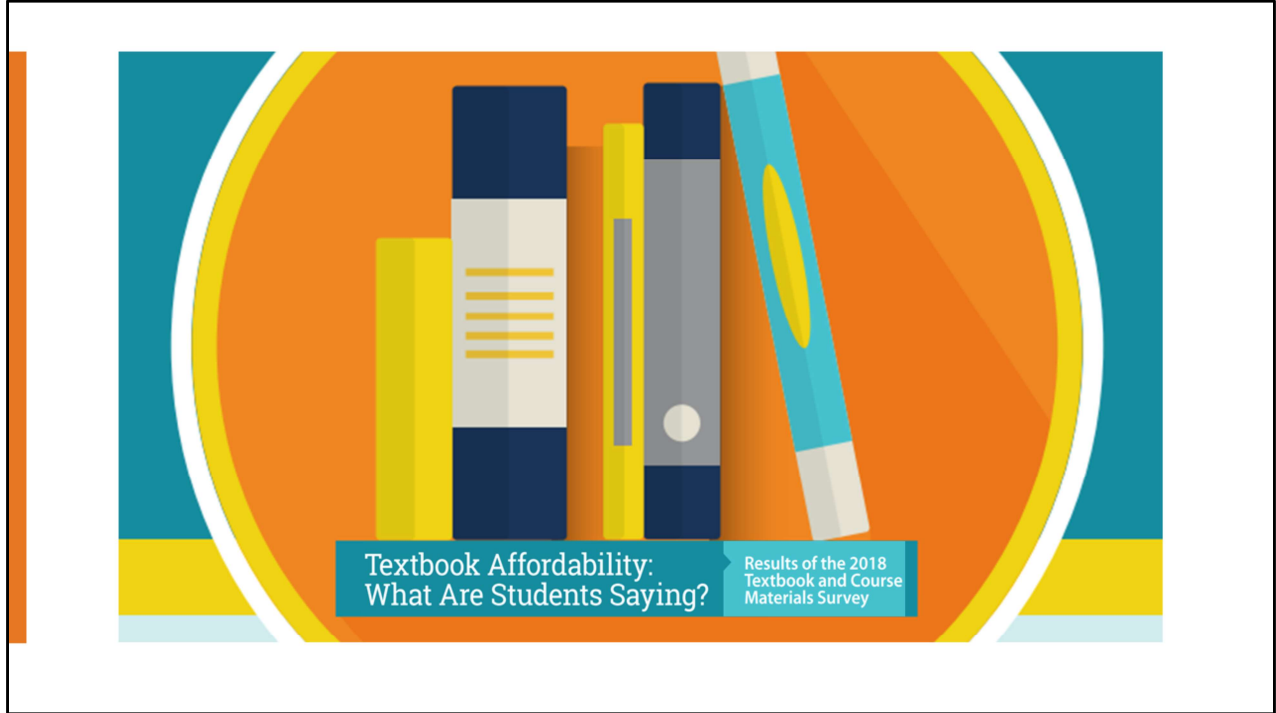
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“I spent my whole summer’s wages...  
on books alone”:  
Gettysburg College Student Textbook and  
Course Materials Survey

Janelle Wertzberger  
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Mary Elmquist

Friday Forum  
Gettysburg College  
February 28, 2020

The idea for this project emerged in January of 2019 during a conversation in the Library's Scholarly Communications department about what to do during Open Education Week in March. During advocacy weeks like Open Education Week, we try to engage various campus audiences. Some of my early career colleagues pitched the idea of a student textbook survey as something that could engage both students and faculty. They thought students would want to express themselves in a survey, and that faculty would be interested in what our own students say.



Our survey was inspired by one from Florida, the Student Textbook and Course Materials Survey conducted by Florida Virtual Campus in 2010, 2012, 2016, and 2018. That survey focuses on how much money students spend, how students are affected by textbook cost, and more. We've shared results from that survey on our campus before, but often faculty are skeptical about whether the results are relevant in our context. And they're right to ask questions – the Florida survey goes to public college and university students from 2-year programs all the way up to PhD programs. Their response group is not exactly like our student body.

My colleagues suggested that we conduct our own survey so we could share responses from Gettysburg students with our own campus. So that's what we did.

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2016 and 2018 Florida survey results: <https://dlss.flvc.org/colleges-and-universities/research/textbooks>



- How much money do Gettysburg College students spend on textbooks and required course materials?
- What strategies do students use to reduce textbook costs?
- What textbook formats do students prefer?
- How are students affected by textbook costs?

We identified these research questions:

- How much money do Gettysburg College students spend on textbooks and required course materials?
- What strategies do students use to reduce textbook costs?
- What textbook formats do students prefer?
- How are students affected by textbook costs?

Our goal was to better understand how textbook costs impact the success of OUR students, so that we could provide local context for the library's work of supporting faculty who wish to eliminate or reduce the cost of course materials for students.

We recruited Sharon Birch to work with us because she has expertise in survey methodology and statistical analysis, as well as a strong interest in open educational resources.



## Methodology

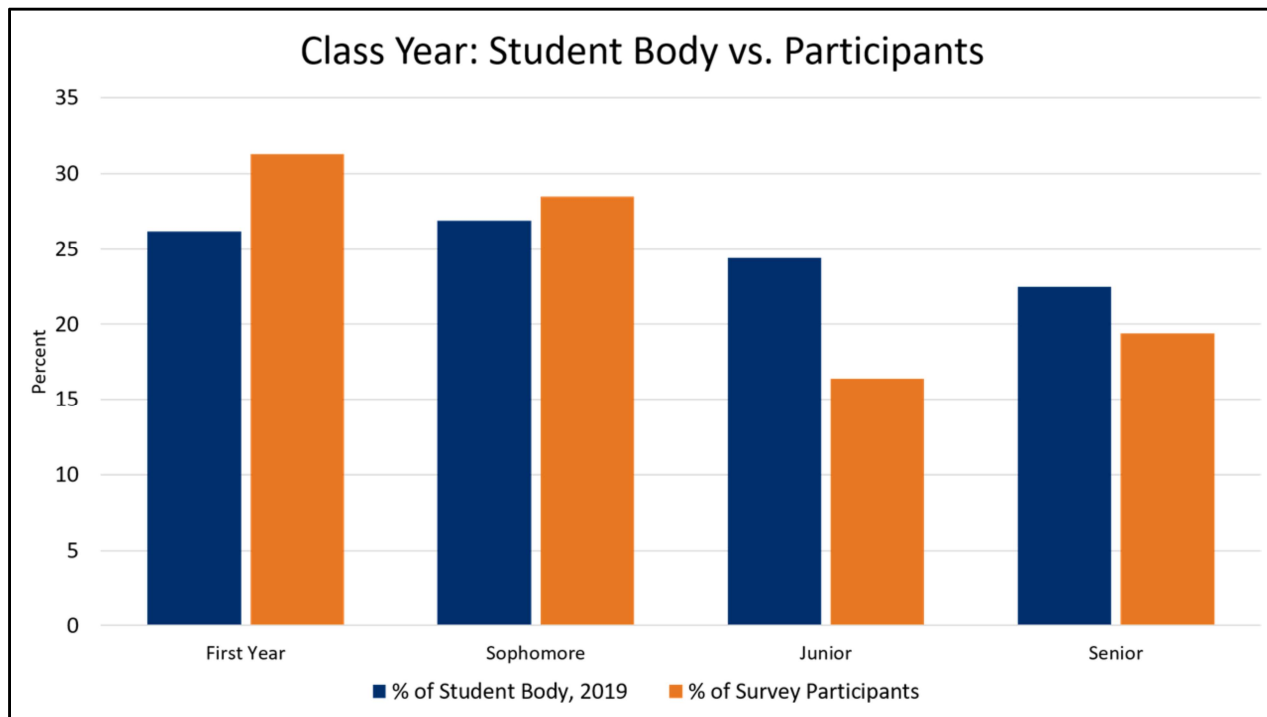
We created a survey with 11 questions about textbooks, including a open ended, free text field that yielded some fascinating comments.

We used LimeSurvey, an open source online survey tool, to administer the survey.

We originally planned to collect data in March 2019, but we changed our collection period to early Fall 2019 after learning that the bookstore administered a different type of textbook survey in the spring that we thought might be confused with ours. In the end, we were happy we rescheduled. Asking students about textbooks when the costs are fresh on their minds, early in the semester, may have yielded more accurate results. Our survey was open for the first 3 weeks of the 2019 fall semester.

In terms of audience – we did not attempt to survey a representative sample and instead promoted the survey to ALL students. We asked 9 additional demographic questions so that we could determine whether the response group is representative of the student body, and also in order to learn whether textbook costs affect some students differently than others. Some of the core demographic questions (gender, race and ethnicity) we only used to determine representation. We used Pell Grant and First Generation as distinguishing characteristics in our subsequent analysis.

Data analysis was performed in SPSS. We primarily used frequencies and descriptive statistics along with crosstabulation and some means testing to see differences between groups.




Our survey was made available to all Gettysburg College students, so our response group was not random. Nor was it fully representative of the student population. In particular, we had a lot more respondents from the first-year and sophomore classes – the blue bars show the class year percent of the entire student body, and the orange bars show class year percent of the response group. We promoted the survey during the library's orientation activity for new students during the first week of classes, so we weren't surprised to see higher participation from the first year class.

The response group was different than the student body in other important ways, too. Demographically, we had more women (69% of survey respondents were female compared to 53% females in the student body). That was the biggest demographic difference between our response group and the student body – if you're interested in more detailed demographics, we can provide that at a later time.



Total Student Body Fall 2019		Response Group (n=438)
22.4%	First Generation	25.6%
18%	Pell Recipients	25%



More relevant to the issue of textbook cost and impact on academic success are these differences: our response group had a higher percentage of first generation students and Pell Grant recipients than the student body as a whole.

Quick reminder about the Pell – Pell Grants are federal grants for students with exceptional financial need. Students with family income of 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/>). We asked students about Pell status as a proxy for household income.

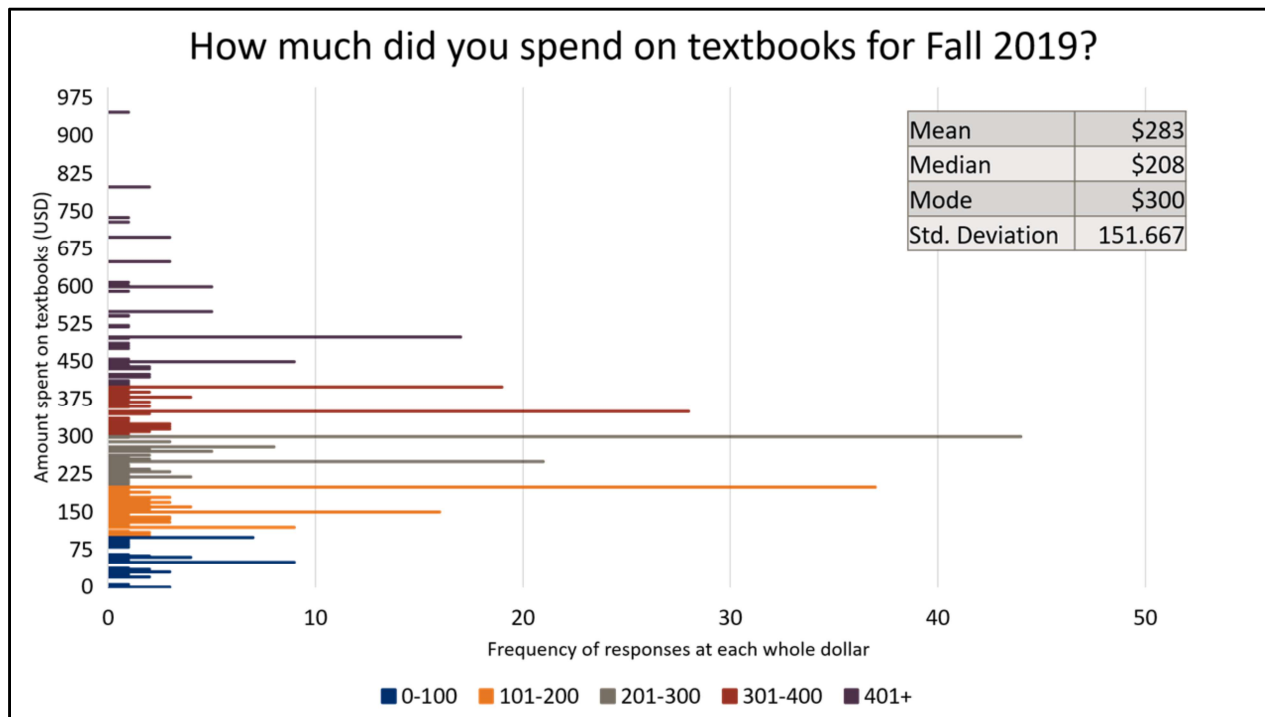
Because we have 438 responses, we think there is value in the results even though our response group isn't statistically representative of the entire student population. These 438 students had something to say about textbooks, and we want to share that with you today.



## Survey Results

We're now going to get into the actual results of the survey, looking at each question in the order that they were asked.

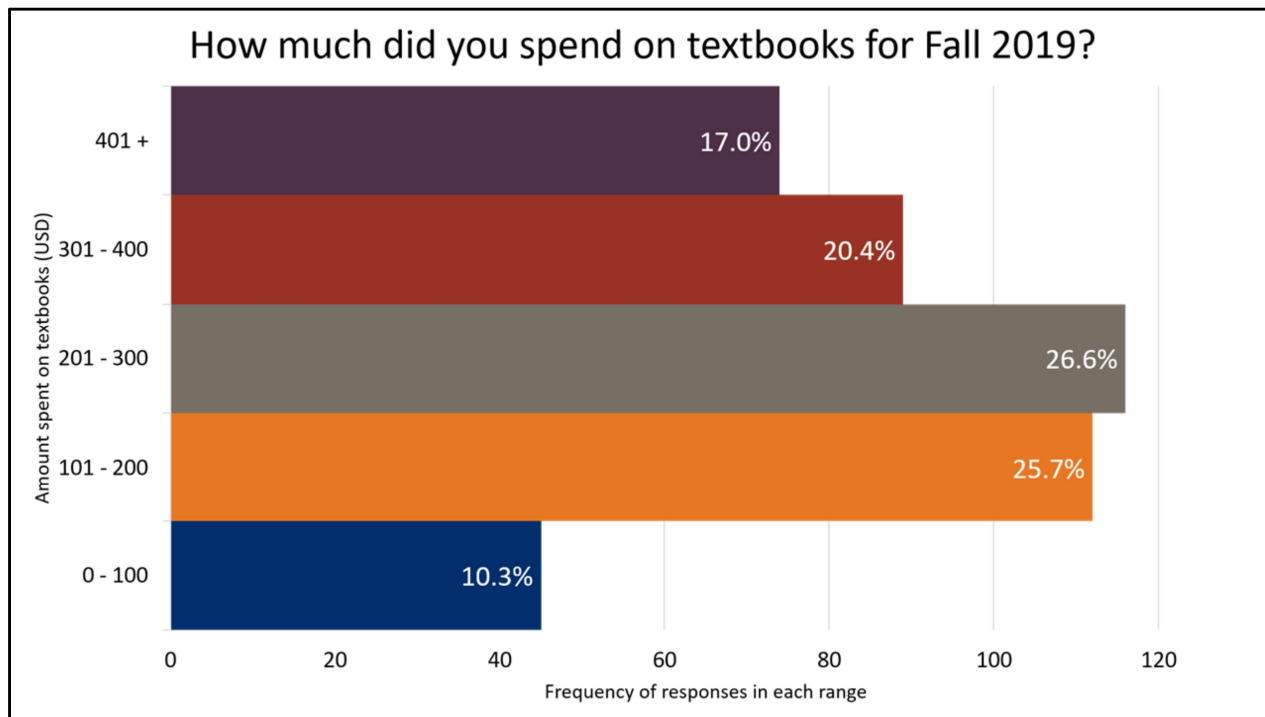
We started by asking participants how much they had spent on books for the entire Fall 2019 semester in whole dollars, meaning college textbooks and other text-based materials. At this point we did not ask them to include additional course materials that they may have needed to purchase, but will get to that in a moment. You should also note that most respondents were likely estimating their costs, but as the survey was administered during the first three weeks of the semester, we feel confident that we received the most accurate answers possible.



This chart represents the distribution of each whole number answer. Participants most frequently answered in \$50 increments, so you can see the greatest spikes at \$150, \$200, \$250, and so on.

The most common response for total money spent on books was \$300, with the highest at \$950 and the lowest at \$0.

I would like to reiterate that we asked how much participants *spent*, not how much their books *cost*, or in other words, how much they were asked to spend. So, these numbers reflect how much students spend *after* they employ the cost-saving strategies we will be discussing later. The responses may also be impacted by financial aid, which will again be discussed later in the presentation.



To simplify our analysis, we broke down responses into \$100 ranges, which felt logical given the spikes we saw at \$50 increments. When you group the responses this way, only about 10% of our respondents spent less than \$100 for all of their books this Fall, and over 15% spent more than \$401. As a reminder, our most common answer was \$300, and 37% of respondents spent more than that.

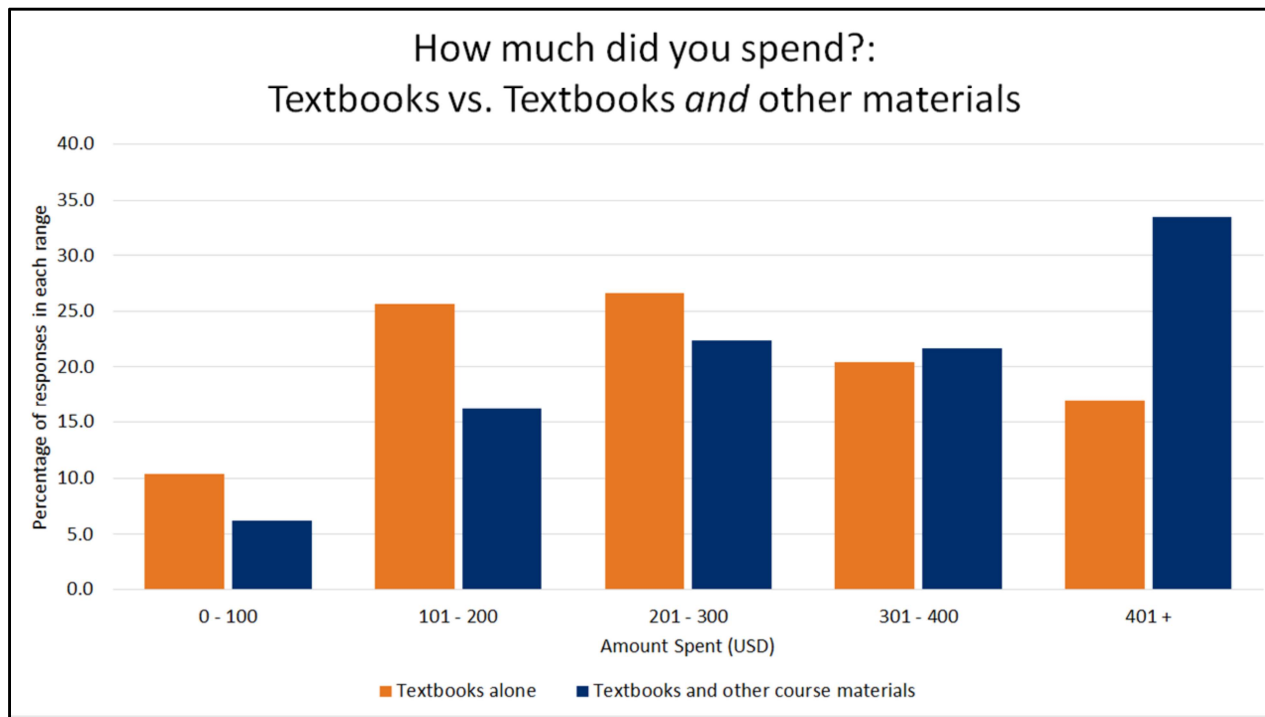
Later we will be sharing some qualitative data that students provided in free-text fields throughout the survey. I want to mention that several students used that space to let us know that their book costs were surprisingly low that semester and did not want us to think that their number reflects their usual experience. It's important to the students that we keep in mind that book costs can vary significantly from semester to semester depending on the classes they are taking.

Spending and Class Year	
Class Year	Mean Spent (USD)
First Year	\$339.81
Sophomore	\$282.74
Junior	\$257.67
Senior	\$206.82

We crossed total money spent on books with all of our demographic questions and saw the greatest differences between class years. First year students report spending the most on average, and average money spent appears to decrease over time among our respondents.

First years were also the most likely to spend over \$401, with 27.2% of first year students reporting having spent that much. Of seniors, only 5.9% report spending over \$400.

As I mentioned earlier



We also asked participants about how much they spent on other course materials (not including books), and provided examples that included access codes, clickers, art supplies, lab manuals, etc. We received a wide range of answers, which is likely because course materials is harder to define than books. For example, students may have included laptops, notebooks, personal care supplies, and others we may not have thought of.

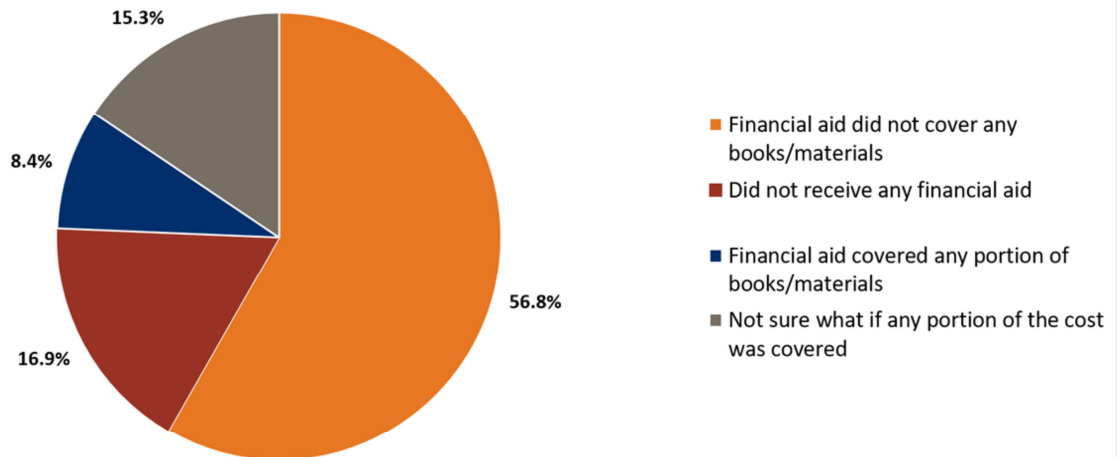
While we asked respondents about books and course materials separately, for our analysis we decided to add together their responses for the cost of books and other materials for greater insight into the overall money spent by the students.

We once again broke down the answers by hundred-dollar increments. Money spent on books alone is in orange, and money spent on books *plus* materials is in blue. We noticed that once course materials are added to the total cost, a much higher percentage of students—around 33%— are spending over \$400 in one semester, compared to just 17% on books alone.

Clearly books are far from the only thing students have to budget for. This provides context into the overall experience of being a student at Gettysburg. However, while the blue provides important context, what we in the library are really focused on is textbooks and other text-based material.

Next, we asked students about how much their financial aid helps them cover their total costs by estimating in percentage ranges how much, if any, of their total textbook and materials costs were covered by their financial aid.

**All Participants:** What percentage of the total cost of books and other course materials was covered by financial aid for Fall 2019?



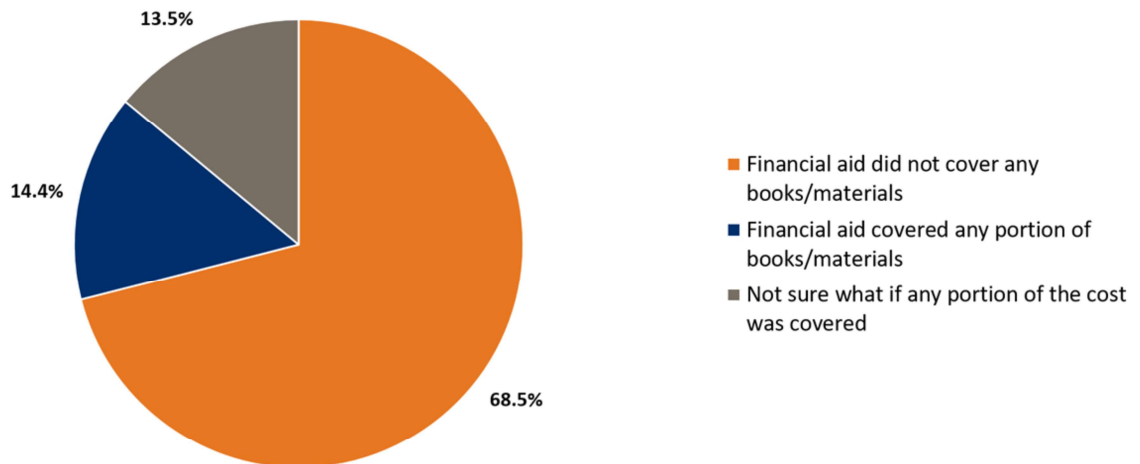
This pie chart reflects the entire respondent groups' answers to the question of financial aid. The largest portion of this chart, at about 56% and highlighted in orange, represents students who report receiving financial aid, but who say that they did not have any funding left over to pay for course materials. Only about 17% of respondents report not receiving any aid at all, and those answers are highlighted in red.

A little over 8% of respondents did say that some amount of their books and/or course materials were covered by their financial aid, and of those, 3.2% reported that *all* their course materials were covered.

We did have a higher percentage of respondents choosing "not sure" than other questions at 15%. We assume that these are students who do receive some kind of aid, but cannot say so conclusively.

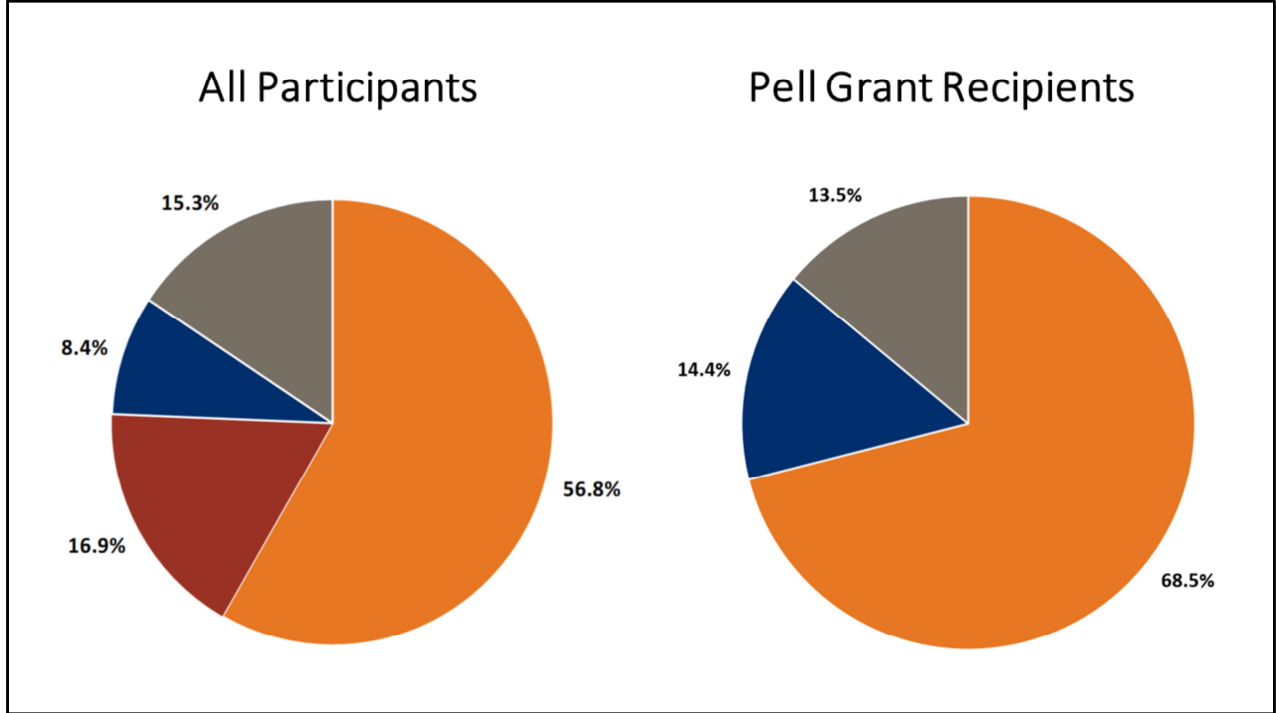


**Pell Grant Recipients: What percentage of the total cost of books and other course materials was covered by financial aid for Fall 2019?**



Again, we looked at these responses crossed with our demographic data, and this time we were mostly interested in Pell Grant status as those students have the greatest financial need and likely receive the most aid. Do our highest-need students at least get their books covered by their aid?

If we consider only the responses of students who said "Yes, I have received a Pell Grant", we discover that almost 69% of Pell Grant recipients who took our survey *do not* have any financial aid money left to spend on books. Even our students with the most financial need are paying for their books out-of-pocket.



Side by side, there is a higher number of respondents with Pell Grants who report having *some* aid to cover their books compared to the total response group. 8% of non-Pell students had *some* aid for books, compared to 14% for students with Pell Grants. Only 3% of non-Pell students said that *all* of their materials were covered, compared to 6% of respondents with Pell Grants who have *all* of their materials covered.

6	All responses
Rent from campus bookstore	52.3%
Buy from a source other than campus bookstore	49.5%
Buy used copies from campus bookstore	47.5%
Rent from a source other than campus bookstore	39.0%
Sell used books	26.0%
Share books with a classmate	16.4%
Only purchase some of the required books	15.8%
Check out from the library	11.6%
Buy lifetime access to a digital version	8.4%
Use a reserve copy from the library	7.3%
I do not attempt to reduce book costs	1.1%

Next we asked students: "What measures have you taken to reduce your required **book** costs for the Fall 2019 semester?" Respondents were able to check as many strategies as applied to them, and the percentages you can see here are the percent of all respondents who chose each option.

Of our respondents, only 1% reported *not* using some kind of cost-reducing strategy.

The most common strategies involve rentals (both from the bookstore and other sources) and buying and selling in the used marketplace.

6	All responses
Rent from campus bookstore	52.3%
Buy from a source other than campus bookstore	49.5%
Buy used copies from campus bookstore	47.5%
Rent from a source other than campus bookstore	39.0%
Sell used books	26.0%
Share books with a classmate	16.4%
Only purchase some of the required books	15.8%
Check out from the library	11.6%
Buy lifetime access to a digital version	8.4%
Use a reserve copy from the library	7.3%
I do not attempt to reduce book costs	1.1%

An additional point we'd like to highlight: only 8.4% of respondents report buying "lifetime access to a digital version" as a cost-saving strategy. Although not pictured here, we also asked in the survey about textbook format preference, and about 86% of respondents reported a preference towards printed, physical books. This could also be related to the popularity of buying and selling used copies as a cost-reducing strategy, since digital materials can't be resold in the US. What I want to get at here, is that, by their own telling, many of our students would prefer access to a print version—although they may settle for a different option based on cost or availability—and moves like Pearson's decision to go digital-only take these choices away from students altogether.

	All responses	First-gen	NOT First-gen
Rent from campus bookstore	52.3%	50.0%	53.0%
Buy from a source other than campus bookstore	49.5%	48.2%	51.0%
Buy used copies from campus bookstore	47.5%	50.9%	46.7%
Rent from a source other than campus bookstore	39.0%	42.9%	39.0%
Sell used books	26.0%	22.3%	27.3%
Share books with a classmate	16.4%	20.5%	13.7%
Only purchase some of the required books	15.8%	18.8%	15.0%
Check out from the library	11.6%	11.6%	11.3%
Buy lifetime access to a digital version	8.4%	15.2%	6.3%
Use a reserve copy from the library	7.3%	6.3%	7.3%
I do not attempt to reduce book costs	1.1%	0.9%	1.3%

As we mentioned previously, we also wanted to take a look at what differences might come up when we compared some of our groups of respondents. So, here you can see how we compared the respondents who reported that they were first-generation students with those who reported they were not. The column for first generation students is on your left here and the non-first-gen is to the right.

We saw what might be some small differences—first-gen respondents *may* be more likely to buy from the bookstore and slightly less likely to sell back books, for example. They may also be slightly more likely to only purchase *some* of the required texts.

	All responses	First-gen	NOT First-gen
Rent from campus bookstore	52.3%	50.0%	53.0%
Buy from a source other than campus bookstore	49.5%	48.2%	51.0%
Buy used copies from campus bookstore	47.5%	50.9%	46.7%
Rent from a source other than campus bookstore	39.0%	42.9%	39.0%
Sell used books	26.0%	22.3%	27.3%
Share books with a classmate	16.4%	20.5%	13.7%
Only purchase some of the required books	15.8%	18.8%	15.0%
Check out from the library	11.6%	11.6%	11.3%
Buy lifetime access to a digital version	8.4%	15.2%	6.3%
Use a reserve copy from the library	7.3%	6.3%	7.3%
I do not attempt to reduce book costs	1.1%	0.9%	1.3%

The greatest difference we saw was that first-gen respondents certainly seemed more likely to share books with a classmate as a way of cutting costs.

We also looked at the strategies used by respondents who reported receiving Pell Grants, in comparison to those students who reported that they did not receive them.

As a quick note: About 19% of our respondents stated that they weren't sure if they had received a Pell Grant—their responses are *not* included in our comparison.

	All responses	First-gen	NOT First-gen	Pell Grant	NO Pell Grant
Rent from campus bookstore	52.3%	50.0%	53.0%	54.1%	50.2%
Buy from a source other than campus bookstore	49.5%	48.2%	51.0%	50.5%	49.8%
Buy used copies from campus bookstore	47.5%	50.9%	46.7%	44.1%	51.2%
Rent from a source other than campus bookstore	39.0%	42.9%	39.0%	42.3%	37.4%
Sell used books	26.0%	22.3%	27.3%	26.1%	24.6%
Share books with a classmate	16.4%	20.5%	13.7%	20.7%	14.7%
Only purchase some of the required books	15.8%	18.8%	15.0%	19.8%	14.7%
Check out from the library	11.6%	11.6%	11.3%	16.2%	10.4%
Buy lifetime access to a digital version	8.4%	15.2%	6.3%	12.6%	8.1%
Use a reserve copy from the library	7.3%	6.3%	7.3%	8.1%	6.2%
I do not attempt to reduce book costs	1.1%	0.9%	1.3%	0.9%	1.4%

Many of the most frequent responses here aren't extremely different, but I want to focus on a couple of the strategies towards the middle of the chart.

	All responses	First-gen	NOT First-gen	Pell Grant	NO Pell Grant
Rent from campus bookstore	52.3%	50.0%	53.0%	54.1%	50.2%
Buy from a source other than campus bookstore	49.5%	48.2%	51.0%	50.5%	49.8%
Buy used copies from campus bookstore	47.5%	50.9%	46.7%	44.1%	51.2%
Rent from a source other than campus bookstore	39.0%	42.9%	39.0%	42.3%	37.4%
Sell used books	26.0%	22.3%	27.3%	26.1%	24.6%
Share books with a classmate	16.4%	20.5%	13.7%	20.7%	14.7%
Only purchase some of the required books	15.8%	18.8%	15.0%	19.8%	14.7%
Check out from the library	11.6%	11.6%	11.3%	16.2%	10.4%
Buy lifetime access to a digital version	8.4%	15.2%	6.3%	12.6%	8.1%
Use a reserve copy from the library	7.3%	6.3%	7.3%	8.1%	6.2%
I do not attempt to reduce book costs	1.1%	0.9%	1.3%	0.9%	1.4%

Of our respondents, students who received Pell Grants were slightly more likely to share books, use library resources, or not buy required texts.

We started to think of these as "coping" measures—to borrow a term used in the Florida survey—where students who may not be able to afford books make the best of other resources that might be around, and as a result have limited or partial access to their course materials.

Based on the responses we received, these may be more common tactics for these students with greater financial need. That is to say, they may also be more likely to struggle academically, due to the lack of access to expensive texts. And we'll talk more about that connection in just a bit.



In their own words: Coping



**"Re-use my sister's books"**

This question did also include a free text, "other" response, where we saw a few other tactics that students were using.

Firstly, we saw more versions of what we called coping strategies—these ways of making do with what they already had available or the absolute cheapest option. Like re-using a sibling's book.

In their own words: Coping

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"**Re-use** my sister's books"

"Use **past editions**  
of the textbook"

Or using past editions of a textbook, rather than the version assigned by their professor.

In their own words: (Possibly) pirating

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"Find **free PDFs** online"

We also saw some responses that...although they weren't explicitly about pirating...Well, it certainly felt like the students might be referencing pirating their texts when they said things like: "Find free PDFs online" or...

In their own words: (Possibly) pirating



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"Find **free PDFs** online"

"I **download** them"

..."I download them." Certainly not our ideal scenario!

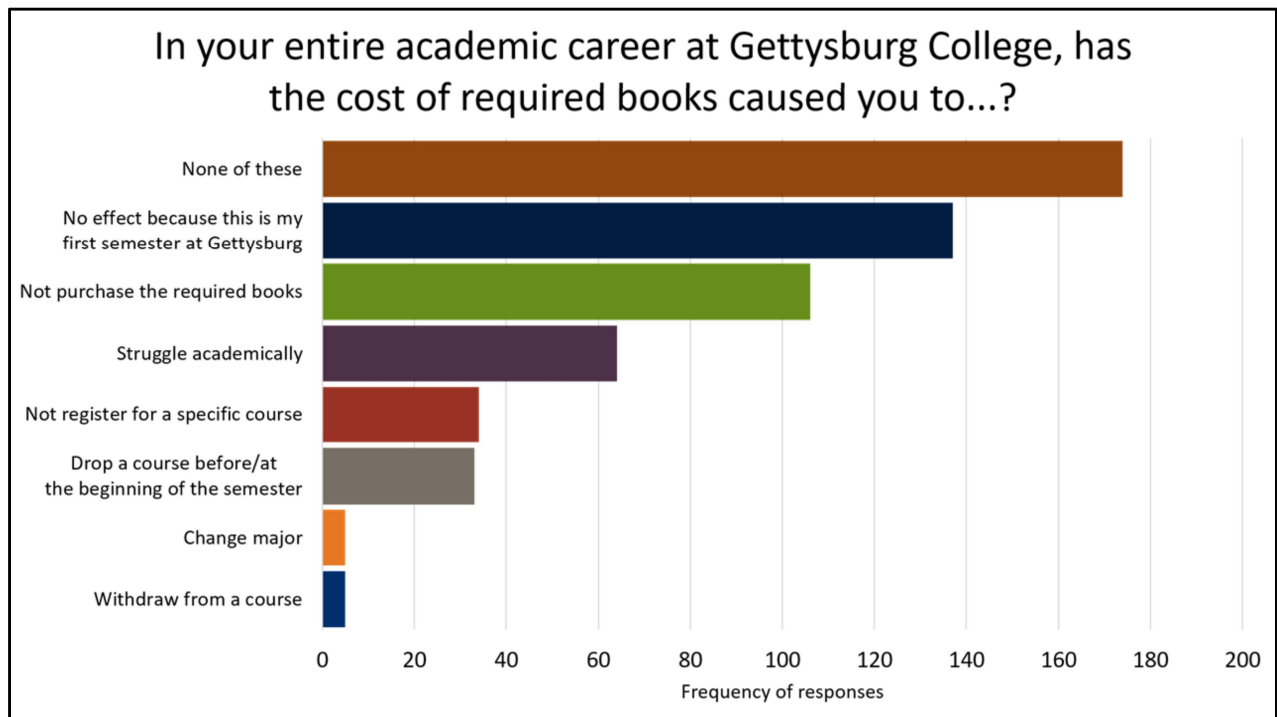
In their own words: Not purchasing



"I chose not to purchase any of the books for my classes as **I could not afford them**"

And finally, although we gave students a pre-written option to say that they had only purchased some of their books, we also had some students who took to the free text field to let us know that they had simply not purchased *any* of the books. Like this student who said: "I chose not to purchase any of the books for my classes as I could not afford them."

I do want to mention that we asked a similar question regarding how students saved money on non-textbook class materials—again, things like art supplies, lab goggles, clickers, etc. Compared to the 1% of students reporting that they *do not* attempt to reduce book costs, about 35% of respondents reported not attempting to reduce the cost of their other materials. This is likely because unlike books, there are fewer options to rent or buy used materials. The next most popular option after "I don't try" was to buy only the minimum required materials, a response that might have been influenced by the general unavailability of used or rentable non-book materials.



Now that we have talked about some of the strategies respondents use to reduce the costs of their books, we're going to look at the effects of those costs on students over their careers at Gettysburg.

We asked respondents to report on the effects of books costs over their entire career at Gettysburg, unlike previous questions where we asked specifically about the Fall 2019 semester.

We also had an option for first year and transfer students to select "no effect because it was their first year at Gettysburg". This was to separate students who simply are not impacted by textbook costs from those who have not been on campus long enough to feel effects (remember, the survey was administered during the first three weeks of the Fall semester). Despite this, we did have a little over a dozen first year students select at least one effect they had already felt within these first three weeks of their college experience.

This chart shows the frequency of responses for the overall response group. While a large portion of the group said no effect or no effect because this is my first semester, the top effects of book costs are not purchasing the required books and struggling academically. Fewer students report avoiding classes with high book costs, changing major, or withdrawing from a course, which is positive in terms of student-agency.

	All responses
Not purchase the required books	24.2%
Struggle academically	14.6%
Not register for a specific course	7.8%
Drop a course before/at the beginning of the semester	7.5%
Withdraw from a course	1.1%
Change major	1.1%
None of these	39.7%
No effect because this is my first semester at Gettysburg	31.3%

This table shows those same effects for the entire response group, but in percentages and with the "no effect" folks separate so that we can more easily focus on students who do feel the effects of book costs. Again, close to a quarter of respondents reported not purchasing their required books at some point and about 15% said that they struggled academically due to an inability to access materials.

While not shown here, we decided to look at a cross between respondents who said that they do not purchase their course materials and those that report struggling academically to see if there is any cross over. Of those respondents who report not purchasing their books due to cost, 46% also report struggling academically.

	All responses	First-gen	NOT First-gen
Not purchase the required books	24.2%	30.4%	21.2%
Struggle academically	14.6%	22.3%	11.1%
Not register for a specific course	7.8%	11.6%	6.1%
Drop a course before/at the beginning of the semester	7.5%	9.8%	5.7%
Withdraw from a course	1.1%	0.9%	1.0%
Change major	1.1%	3.6%	0.3%
None of these	39.7%	27.7%	45.1%
No effect because this is my first semester at Gettysburg	31.3%	31.3%	32.7%

Similarly to the previous question about cost-saving strategies, we wanted to look at how different populations reported their experiences. We looked again at our first-generation respondents.



	All responses	First-gen	NOT First-gen
Not purchase the required books	24.2%	30.4%	21.2%
Struggle academically	14.6%	22.3%	11.1%
Not register for a specific course	7.8%	11.6%	6.1%
Drop a course before/at the beginning of the semester	7.5%	9.8%	5.7%
Withdraw from a course	1.1%	0.9%	1.0%
Change major	1.1%	3.6%	0.3%
None of these	39.7%	27.7%	45.1%
No effect because this is my first semester at Gettysburg	31.3%	31.3%	32.7%

Overall, first generation respondents report more overall effects of book costs, with 30% who do not purchase the required material compared to 21% of non-first-gen students. 22% of first generation students report struggling academically compared to only 11% of non-first gen students. And 12% of first-gen students reporting not registering for a course due to cost versus 6% of non-first-gen.

Additionally, 28% of first-gen respondents reported not feeling any effects of book costs versus 45% of our non-first-gen participants.

	All responses	First-gen	NOT First-gen	Pell Grant	NO Pell Grant
Not purchase the required books	24.2%	30.4%	21.2%	33.3%	18.3%
Struggle academically	14.6%	22.3%	11.1%	27.0%	8.7%
Not register for a specific course	7.8%	11.6%	6.1%	9.9%	6.3%
Drop a course before/at the beginning of the semester	7.5%	9.8%	5.7%	7.2%	6.3%
Withdraw from a course	1.1%	0.9%	1.0%	1.8%	0.5%
Change major	1.1%	3.6%	0.3%	1.8%	0.5%
None of these	39.7%	27.7%	45.1%	26.1%	49.0%
No effect because this is my first semester at Gettysburg	31.3%	31.3%	32.7%	33.3%	30.8%

Once again we also looked at students who reported receiving Pell grants, and like first-gen respondents, a higher percentage reported effects from the costs of books.

	All responses	First-gen	NOT First-gen	Pell Grant	NO Pell Grant
Not purchase the required books	24.2%	30.4%	21.2%	33.3%	18.3%
Struggle academically	14.6%	22.3%	11.1%	27.0%	8.7%
Not register for a specific course	7.8%	11.6%	6.1%	9.9%	6.3%
Drop a course before/at the beginning of the semester	7.5%	9.8%	5.7%	7.2%	6.3%
Withdraw from a course	1.1%	0.9%	1.0%	1.8%	0.5%
Change major	1.1%	3.6%	0.3%	1.8%	0.5%
None of these	39.7%	27.7%	45.1%	26.1%	49.0%
No effect because this is my first semester at Gettysburg	31.3%	31.3%	32.7%	33.3%	30.8%

33% of Pell recipients reported not purchasing books compared to 18% of non-Pell participants. Most drastically, Pell respondents were about *three times more likely* to struggle academically as a result of textbook costs, at 27% versus about 9% in the non-Pell respondent group.

Again, while 49% of non-Pell students reported no effects, only 26% of Pell respondents reported feeling unaffected.

I would like to take a moment to remind us all why we are looking at first generation and Pell specifically. It is well understood that first-generation college students like myself face additional challenges when it comes to adjusting to a college setting. We were not sure if this would appear in our survey results, but the fact that it does remind us that textbooks are an issue of equity for college students.

The Pell responses do the same thing. Our students with the greatest financial need are not set up for success as soon as they get here. Getting in the door is just one step in a long process, and these students in financial need report the greatest number of consequences due to book costs. Have you ever had a student that appeared bright and excited and participated in class, but turned in weak homework assignments? Perhaps it is because they quite simply cannot afford the materials they need to succeed.

## In their own words: Financial sacrifice

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And the students spoke to that fact. We also provided participants with an "other" free-response field, where we received more specific reports of the effects of cost on the student experience. Their answers really broke down into two categories: financial sacrifice...

In their own words: Financial sacrifice

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"go **broke**"

In their own words: Financial sacrifice



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"go broke"

"Broke my wallet and made me  
**lose other opportunities**  
that required money"

## In their own words: Financial sacrifice

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"go **broke**"

"Broke my wallet and made me **lose other opportunities** that required money"

"Work **extra shifts** to be able to afford books"

## In their own words: Financial sacrifice

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"go **broke**"

"Broke my wallet and made me **lose other opportunities** that required money"

"Work **extra shifts** to be able to afford books"

"**Cut costs** in other school areas"



In their own words: Academic sacrifice

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.....and academic sacrifice.

In their own words: Academic sacrifice

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"It's made me realize that I could  
**never be a science major**  
even if I wanted to"

In their own words: Academic sacrifice



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"It's made me realize that I could **never be a science major**  
even if I wanted to"

"struggle to share book  
with others and has  
**affected doing my hw**"

## In their own words: Academic sacrifice

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"It's made me realize that I could **never be a science major**  
even if I wanted to"

"struggle to share book with others and has  
**affected doing my hw**"

"Use **unpreferred**  
**book formats**"

## In their own words: Academic sacrifice

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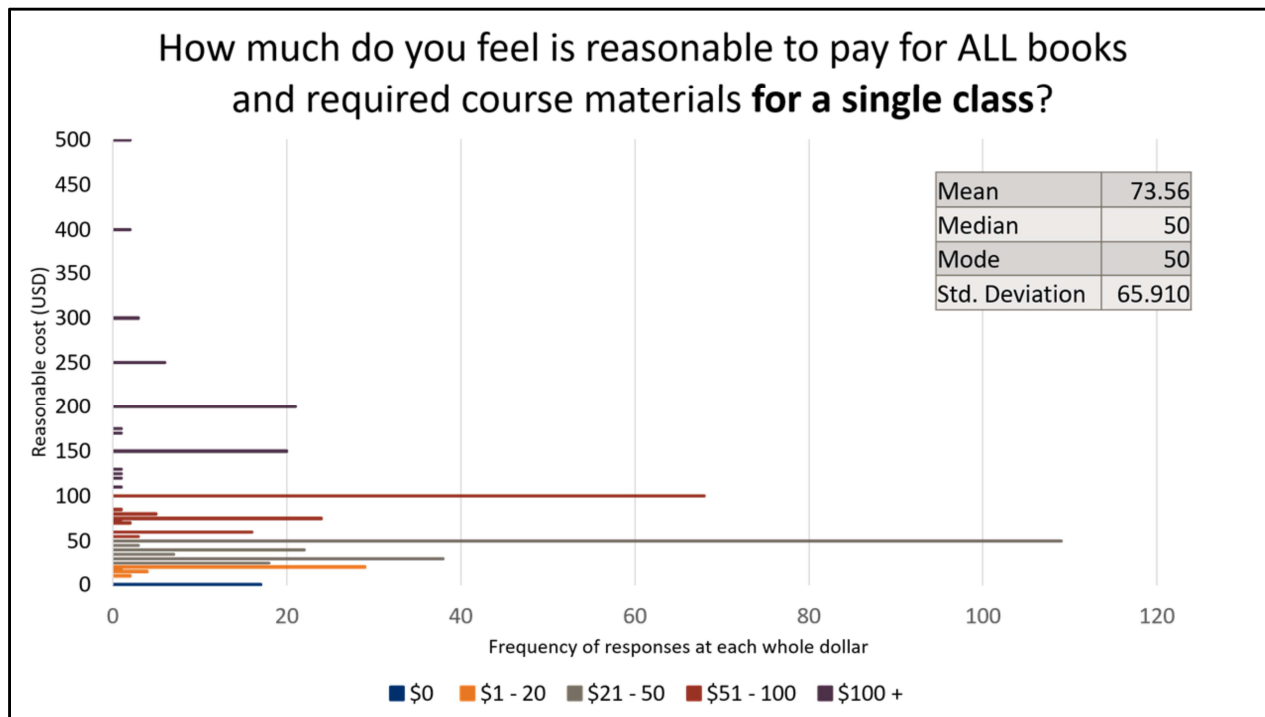


"It's made me realize that I could **never be a science major**  
even if I wanted to"

"struggle to share book with others and has  
**affected doing my hw**"

"Use **unpreferred book formats**"

**"Not being ready for my exams  
because I lacked the materials"**

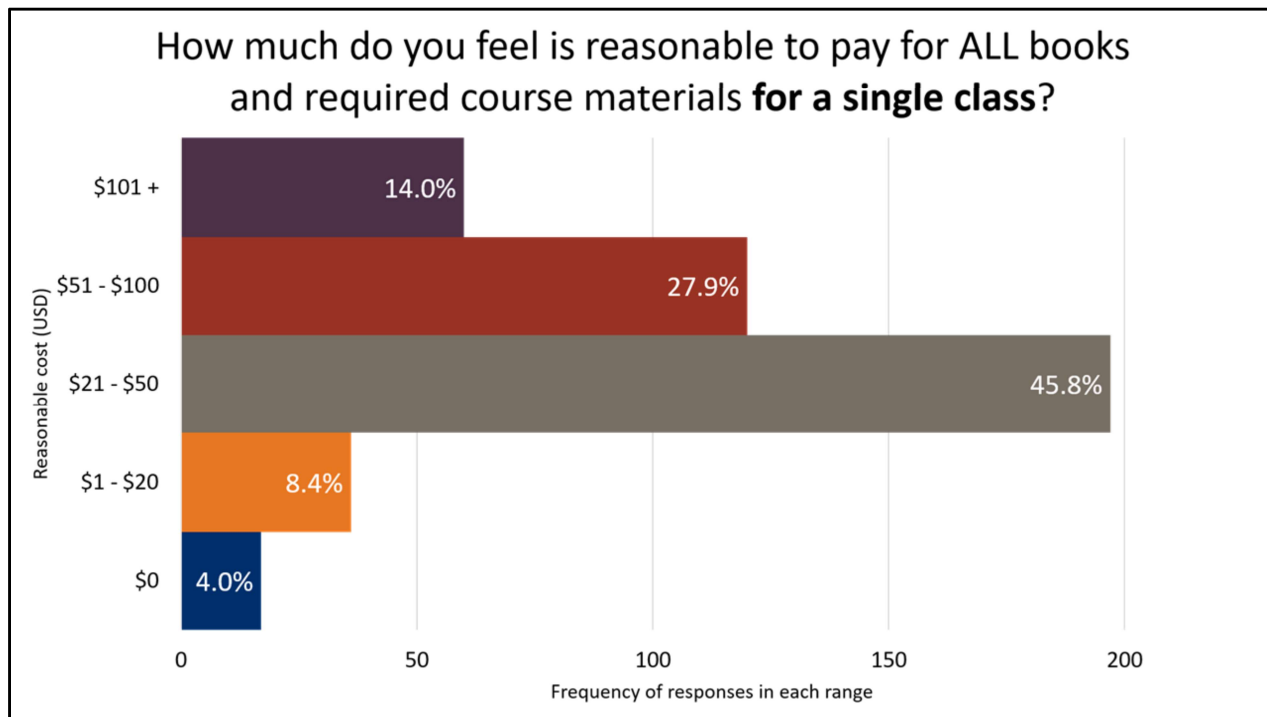


Because we thought the results would be particularly interesting to faculty, we wanted to find out what price students saw as reasonable. For this question, we asked what they felt was a reasonable cost for all books and materials for a single class, and like for the first question, gave them free reign to enter a whole dollar amount.

The median and mode of reasonable price per course responses were both \$50, and once again, we had some more common numbers: 20, 30, 50, and 100 all had over 25 responses.

We also had some big outliers in responses to this question—as high as \$500—resulting in a mean of about \$74, noticeably higher than the median and mode. We wanted to look at price per course, since that would generally be the most helpful number for faculty. This may have caused some confusion, though, as we had asked earlier about money spent for the whole semester.

Without any context for why students see a number as a reasonable one, this does make us a little uncertain about the answers we received. We feel that it's likely that some students were responding to the question of how much was reasonable for the semester, but we have no way to separate those answers out.



With that in mind, we broke this question into ranges as well. When we put them all together, you can see that just under 60% of respondents stated \$50 or less as a reasonable price per course.

All-in-all, we're comfortable with that number—\$50—for what our average respondent sees as a reasonable price per class at Gettysburg College. It's close to the national standard of \$40 for a low cost course, and again, it comes straight from *our* students.



For the final question in our survey (other than the demographics questions) consisted of a completely open free text field. We asked participants if they had anything else to say, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, they did.

We saw some repeated themes. We're going to share some quotes from our students here, and in order to do that, Sarah is going to come up and share the mic with me. I'll tell you a little about these ideas we heard, and she'll read the quotes out loud in case anyone has trouble seeing them.





"Teachers should try to look for **cheaper materials and books** that cover the same content to **help their students.**"

First: participants shared their ideas about who was responsible for the high cost of books. Sometimes they assigned blame, or suggested a solution, or just expressed their frustration with a particular system. Some students viewed the problem broadly—pointing at textbook publishers or the College very generally. Others suggested that it was the responsibility of their professors or academic departments.

"Unless the teachers know their students are highly privileged when it comes to finances, they shouldn't **expect students to buy such expensive books then joke about it** the first day of classes"

”

”

"the college bookstore tells you that there are options for used books but they end up **charging you for a new book without telling you.**"

Some saw the responsibility as belonging to the bookstore or library.

"Far too often have I bought **books that I have never opened**, and not because I didn't do assigned readings, but because **they were not utilized in the class** and were not needed to do well in a course."



Respondents also expressed some common, repeated frustrations, mostly to do with cost. Participants were frustrated with what they saw as the under-utilization of expensive materials in class.

”

"It's crazy that I have to get an online subscription for a single class that is alone **\$120.**"

The price of access codes and subscriptions was also singled out.

”

"for some of my classes with online access it is frustrating because I know other **online programs that are free** that can meet the same goals that worked really well in high school."



"With the cost of tuition to go to this school, I think it's **unreasonable** to ask people to spend **hundreds of dollars** on textbooks."

Many respondents were also frustrated with the cost of college generally...and the way that textbook costs added to the larger whole.



"People coming from **lower income families** can't afford it and financial aid is **little to no help.**"

And many again shared their perception that their financial aid wasn't adequately covering their textbook and materials costs.



"I have on several occasions been asked to purchase books during the first week of classes, which **I did not budget for**. This is unfair, and often causes me to be **behind in a class** while waiting for the materials to come in."

As a third major theme, participants took this space to tell us more explicitly about the consequences and difficulties they experienced from the cost of their books.

”

"it created a **struggle and a more strict budget** for not only myself, but my parents and **family at home.**"

Some of their stories were tales of financial hardship.

”

"Due to the **high prices of the book**, I rent most of the books... this affects my academics because I **can not go back to the book** I read last semester to look for any references that I might need."

And some participants told us about their experiences of academic difficulties.

So, after all these things that students told us...what are the main takeaways and next steps we can take?

## Takeaways

# Question assumptions

Hand off to: Janelle

I'm going to attempt to distill everything we learned into a few overarching takeaways.

- The first is that we should all **question our assumptions** as they relate to student preparation for class and academic performance. There are a lot of reasons students might not do well in a class, but it's pretty clear that students without the required texts find it harder to succeed academically. And if students don't appear to have the required texts, it might be because they are financially out of reach. Our respondents were clear that financial aid packages almost never cover the cost of textbooks, so be careful not to assume that there's another office on campus taking care of this barrier. Of course, none of these things might be true for any particular student situation – but they *might* be. Consider the possibility.
- The next takeaway is that **students know this is a problem**. They know the textbook marketplace is incredibly complex right now – they navigate it every semester. They know that not having assigned books has a negative impact on their academics. And they know they can't solve these problems by themselves. Their comments in the open-ended fields are a cry for faculty and administrators to hear them.
- And the final takeaway is this: Gettysburg students say **\$50 is a reasonable cost for all books and course materials – PER COURSE**. That's \$200/semester if you take 4 courses.

Only 22.4% of survey respondents spent \$200 or less for Fall 2019 books and materials.

You've probably already noticed that the theme of equity (or rather, inequity) runs through these takeaways. If we want all of our students to be able to make the most of the incredible educational experience we provide here at Gettysburg, they all need to be able to access the tools of learning: their required texts and course materials. Right now, they can't.

# Takeaways

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## Question assumptions

# Students know

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# What can we do?

5 suggestions

Let's turn this frown upside down! I like to end presentations by offering action items so that everyone might feel empowered to go out and make a change that benefits students, no matter where you work. I've got 5 suggestions for you today.



# Know how much books and materials cost

The first thing you can do is become better informed about how much books and materials cost, whether you're a professor responsible for choosing them or just someone who's interested. Look up the costs on the bookstore website and amazon, just like students do. Prices may have inflated since you last checked.

If you're a faculty member, share a cost estimate with your students - in advance if possible. This eliminates surprises.

The best way faculty can be transparent about course materials is to report them all to the bookstore in a timely fashion, because the bookstore website is the one place where all students can see the total cost of taking the course (whether or not they buy books 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. Not every student has a credit card and a Prime membership. Many people find it effortless to order from amazon, but it's not universally easy for all our students.

Zero cost courses should also be reported to the bookstore. I know that administrative assistants do a lot of the communicating with the bookstore so I thought I'd mention this.

You want 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.



## Ask students about their experience obtaining books

The next thing you can do is open a line of communication with students about obtaining books. We got information from students because we asked for it. You can get more nuanced information about your individual courses and your department's courses by asking, too. Consider surveying your students. Ask them questions like:

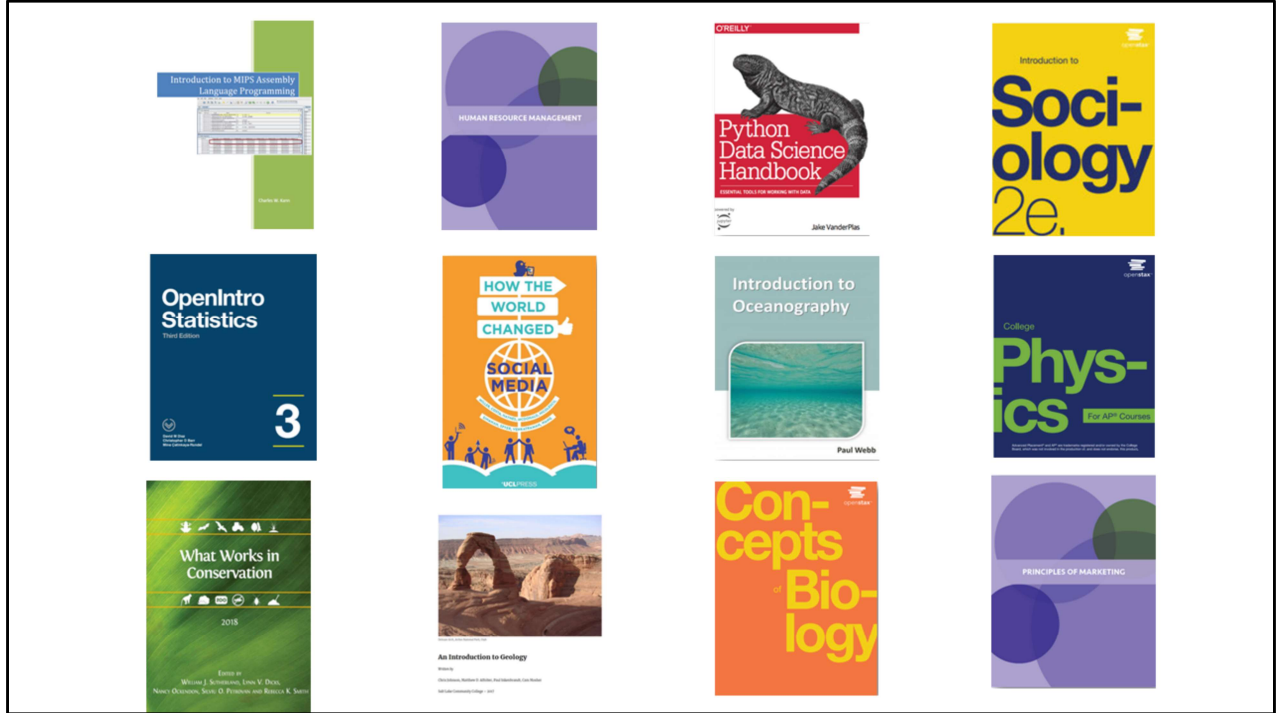
- Did you get all of the assigned materials?
- How much did you pay?
- Did you buy or rent?
- Digital or print? Did you get the format you actually prefer, or the one that was cheapest?
- If you didn't get all the books, which ones and why? How did you cope? Did you share books? Use pirated copies? Rely on library books, interlibrary loan, or reserves? Something else?

It's so easy to throw together a google form or a Moodle survey with anonymous responses.



# Ask how colleagues reduce course costs

Another possible action is to ask colleagues how they reduce – or eliminate – course costs. This is not a hypothetical question, as in "how could we reduce costs" - it's already happening. Many Gettysburg faculty have already achieved zero or low cost classes. Ask around!



These are all open or zero-cost textbooks being used by Gettysburg faculty. They are completely free to access online, and also free of copyright restrictions, meaning it is legal to print, reuse, and in most cases, to revise and remix them. This puts faculty in control of their own learning materials.



# Have a Plan B

Next action item: have a Plan B.

Unexpected things happen every semester, and we have to address them as they come up. But students not being able to afford expensive textbooks is not, in fact, unexpected. It has happened, it is happening, and it will continue to happen. Don't be surprised; instead, be prepared. What will you do when a student tells you they can't afford to buy the book for a few weeks, or ever? What will you do when you realize someone is struggling after the first exam and also, they don't have the book, so those things may be connected? Everyone's teaching and learning experience will be smoother if you prepare for that possibility in advance.





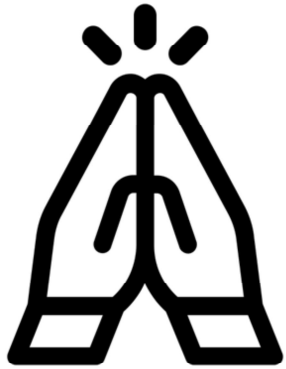
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## Attend a workshop and evaluate an open textbook

Tuesday, March 3 OR Wednesday, March 4, 4-5 pm  
Register online.

Finally, if you're ready to learn more, we invite you to attend one of the open textbook workshops being held next week! These presentations will focus on using Open Educational Resources as a strategy that can positively impact both the student learning experience AND the faculty teaching experience. As an added incentive, faculty attendees will be invited to review an open textbook that could support one of their courses and receive a \$200 stipend for the completed review. If this intrigues you at all, why not join us and get paid for investigating a possible textbook?

There is more information about the workshop in this afternoon's digest, including a link to register. It's not too late to register! If you can't find the link, just email me.



Created by Adrien Coquet  
from Noun Project

Thank you!

Questions? Email  
[OER@gettysburg.edu](mailto:OER@gettysburg.edu)

Slides:  
<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/librarypubs/130>



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