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## 2019 Gettysburg College Student Textbook and Course Materials Survey Executive Summary

### 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.

The Executive Summary details our research questions, key findings, and main takeaways.

### Keywords

Textbook affordability, Open education, Gettysburg College, Scholarly Communications, Musselman Library, undergraduates

### Disciplines

Higher Education | Library and Information Science | Scholarly Communication

### Comments

The survey results were originally shared with the campus during our Friday Forum presentation titled, "[I spent my whole summer's wages...on books alone': Gettysburg College Student Textbook and Course Materials Survey](#)".

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# 2019 Gettysburg College Student Textbook and Course Materials Survey

Janelle Wertzberger, Sarah Appedu, Mary Elmquist

**Background** This survey was inspired by the Student Textbook and Course Materials Survey conducted by Florida Virtual Campus<sup>1</sup>. Administered in the first three weeks of the Fall 2019 semester, it contained eleven questions about students' personal experiences with textbooks and course materials during their careers at Gettysburg College. Nine additional demographic questions were primarily used to determine representation in comparison with the student body. The survey was administered by Musselman Library in partnership with statistician Sharon Birch.

## 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?
- ◆ How are students affected by textbook costs?

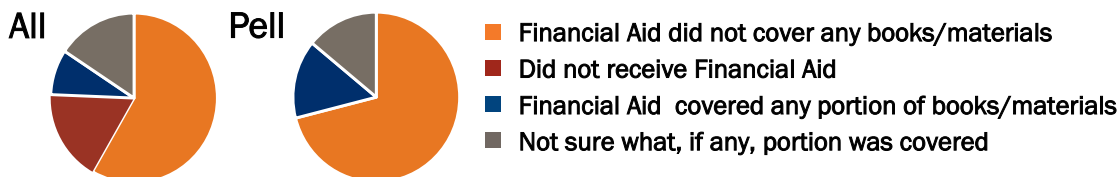
## Summary of Key Findings

### 1 Almost 2/3 of participants spent more than \$200 on books.

When asked how much money they spent on books and other text-based materials, 64% of survey respondents reported spending over \$200 in the Fall 2019 semester. The most common answer was \$300. First year students were the highest spenders on average with a mean of \$339.81, and seniors spent the least on average at \$206.82. When responses for money spent on books were combined with those for money spent on other course materials (lab manuals, clickers, art supplies, access codes, etc.), about 33% of respondents spent over \$400 in one semester.

### 2 Students report that financial aid is not helping enough.

56% of all respondents reported receiving financial aid but not having funding left over for course materials. Almost 69% of Pell Grant recipients, students with the greatest financial need, also reported not having any financial aid left. However, a higher number of Pell Grant recipients reported having some aid to cover their books. Only 8% of all students had some aid for books, compared to 14% for students with Pell Grants, and while 3% of all students said that *all* of their materials were covered by aid, 6% of Pell Grants recipients said all were covered.



Regardless of their financial situation, most respondents said they paid for their books out of pocket.

1. <https://dlss.flvc.org/colleges-and-universities/research/textbooks>

### 3 Students reduce textbook costs in a variety of ways.

Of respondents, only 1% reported *not* using some kind of cost-reducing strategy when it came to purchasing their textbooks. Overall, the most common strategies involved renting (from both the bookstore and other sources) and trading in the used marketplace.

First-generation<sup>2</sup> participants were more likely to share books with a classmate as a way of cutting costs than their non-first-gen counterparts, and students who received Pell Grants were slightly more likely to share books or not buy required texts than those who did not. These "coping" measures, which may leave students with limited or partial access to their course materials, may be more common for these students with greater need.

	All responses	First-gen	NOT First-gen	Pell Grant	NO Pell Grant
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%

### 4 Book costs may affect some groups more than others.

Participants were asked about the effects of books costs over their entire career at Gettysburg College. About a quarter of all respondents reported not purchasing required books, and about 15% said that they struggled academically due to an inability to access materials.

First-generation students and Pell Grant recipients were both more likely to report some effect of book costs. Respondents from both groups were also more likely to report they had not purchased required books than participants not in those respective categories. First-gen students also reported struggling academically at twice the rate of non-first-gen students, and Pell respondents were about three times more likely to report struggling academically because of textbook costs.

	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%
None of these	39.7%	27.7%	45.1%	26.1%	49.0%

### 5 Students say \$50 is a reasonable price for all materials per class.

Participants were asked how much they felt was reasonable to pay for *all* of their required books and course materials *per course*. The most common response was \$50, which is not far from the frequently quoted \$40 limit for low-cost courses. This number—directly from Gettysburg students—is what Musselman Library will use when talking about local low-cost courses.

**\$50**

2. Gettysburg College defines first-generation as a student from a family where neither parent has obtained at least a Bachelor's degree.

# “Anything else to say?”

## Student responses in the open-ended text field

"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."

"More books should be provided in the library, especially ones that we do not read the full text"

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

"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"

"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."

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

"A lot wait until a few days before class or the first week of class with the assumption that students can simply buy it at the bookstore...or that everyone has Amazon Prime for quick shipping. It sometimes feels like there is an assumption that students here can afford to do all that, but it just ends up making the student feel left out and hindering their academics at the start of the semester"

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

"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."

It is ridiculous that I have to spend months of gas money on books that I will use twice throughout four months. I do receive financial aid for my books; however, sometimes it is not completely covered by the aid and I have to pay out of pocket.

# What can you do?

## Know how much your books and materials cost

Look up the costs on the bookstore website and amazon, just like students do. Prices may have inflated since you last checked. Share a cost estimate with your students in advance if possible to eliminate surprises. The best way to 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).

## Ask students about their experience 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?

## Ask how colleagues reduce course costs

Many Gettysburg faculty have already achieved zero- or low-cost classes. Ask around!

## Have a Plan B

Students not being able to afford expensive textbooks is no longer unexpected. 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.

## Consider Open Educational Resources (OER) and other alternative materials

Adopting OER has been shown to improve student success outcomes, especially for disadvantaged students<sup>3</sup>, but in addition to being an equitable and affordable solution for students, OER offer pedagogical benefits for faculty. Since OER are published under an open license, many can be adapted to suit the way you teach your course and the way your students learn. OER are not yet available for every course, but there are many other potential options (such as course reserves or library licensed ebooks) that can help ensure that *all* your students have access to their materials.

## Contact Us

### Questions?

Email: [OER@gettysburg.edu](mailto:OER@gettysburg.edu) or talk to your department's library liaison

### Find this report in The Cupola

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3. 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.

