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# Library-Provided e-Textbooks Boost Student Success: Summer 2021 Campus Report

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# Library-Provided e-Textbooks Boost Student Success

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**Summer 2021 Campus Report**

## Key Findings

**1,831% Return on investment**.
Milner Library's investment of $7,858.37 on textbooks saved students up to $143,880.50. With greater campus buy-in we can increase that ratio.

**Impactful savings** for ISU students.

"It allows me to have more money allocated to what most college students actually struggle with like eating, housing and mental health. I can gain peace of mind knowing that finances isn't one of the factors hindering my academic experience here at the university."

"This was an especially tough semester financially for many students, and the option of free access was extraordinarily welcome."

**It's an equity issue**. Both faculty and students highlighted this.

"Having this text free to use has been an enriching and fulfilling experience. Eliminating payment walls is a massive stride toward an anti-racist movement and bridging the academic gap."

"Students who can't access these resources are at a serious disadvantage, and finances seem like one of the top reasons students leave our college. I see centrally accessible textbooks like this as contributing to that process as well - this seems like a wise use of our university funds/tuition dollars."

**Students read more, learned more,** and understood the material better.

"When texts are free and easily accessible I am much more likely to use that resource."

"It motivated me to do reading that I may not have otherwise done."

"These eBooks have been super helpful in supplementing my learning about the main topics in my class. They were useful for understanding the course's other materials, and they aided my papers."

**The average grade expected by participating students was 90.2%.**

## Project Background

Textbook Affordability is a profound obstacle to academic success for students at universities across the United States, and Illinois State University is no exception. The pandemic has only exacerbated the issue by restricting student access to library course reserves, textbook sharing programs, and other local programs devised to address equity issues around textbook affordability. In short, the pandemic added additional and often severe financial pressure on our students as

they and their families have been facing job loss, illness, and medical bills and took away support networks devised for in-person education.

While we know that overall college costs have risen dramatically over recent years, the increase in textbook prices has significantly outpaced both overall college costs and overall consumer prices, rising 88% between 2006 and 2016 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

**Consumer price indexes for tuition and school related items, not seasonally adjusted, January 2006-July 2016**
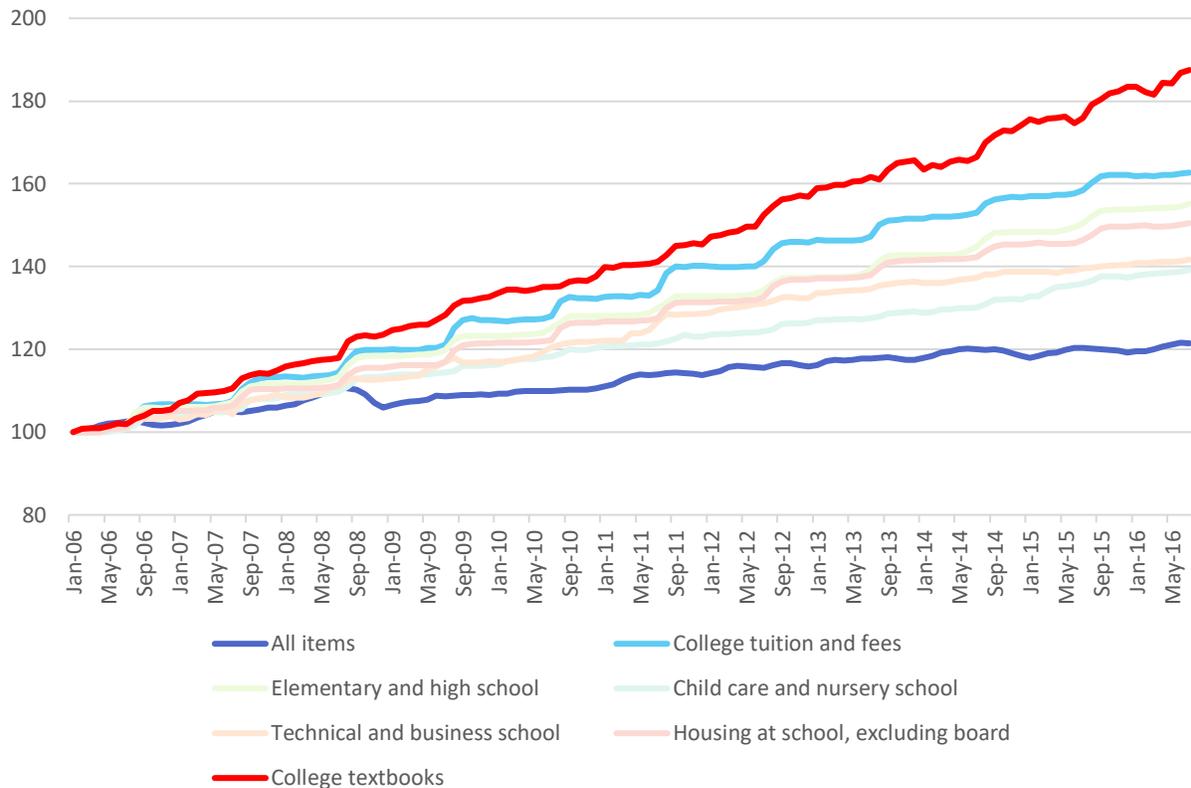


Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2016/college-tuition-and-fees-increase-63-percent-since-january-2006.htm

**Key findings from the textbook affordability literature**:

- A nationwide survey of undergraduates at 82 universities found that during the pandemic **65% of students surveyed skipped buying assigned textbooks and 21% skipped buying an access code** despite concerns it would impact their grade (Nagle & Vitez, 2021).
- The average undergraduate spends about **$5,000 on textbooks over four years** (Ma, 2020).
- At one Maryland public state university, students reported **dropping out over debts of less than $1,000** (Shankie, 2014).
- Students report working additional hours to cover textbook costs, and this impacts their academic performance (Senack & Donoghue, 2016).
- Students frequently delay purchasing their books or go without them entirely because of cost (Senack, 2014).
- In another study, **82% of students felt that they would have done significantly better in their coursework if their textbooks had been freely available online** (Senack, 2014).

**An [internal recruitment white paper](#) cited in the spring 2021 Provost's Retreat pointed to financial hardship as one of the most common reasons students leave our institution.**

**ISU Textbook Affordability Committee Surveys**

In spring 2019, the Illinois State University Textbook Affordability Committee [surveyed more than 850 students](#) to determine the extent to which textbook costs might be a problem for ISU students. Key findings include:

- 73% of students did not acquire a required textbook or other course material due to cost.
- 89% of students delayed purchasing a textbook or other course material due to cost.
  - Students of color reported 8% higher than white students in delayed textbook purchases.
- Students use a variety of sources to acquire textbooks and other course materials (Campus bookstores, Amazon, and rental services like Chegg ranked highly). Only 7% rely on Milner materials.
- Students expressed frustration related to access codes and feeling like faculty didn't use required textbooks.
- 61% said they had to purchase an access code at an average estimated cost of $120/code
- 69% purchased required material that they said the professor did not use.
- 32% of students take on credit card debt to pay for their textbooks.
- 42% of Black students and 32% of white students use their work money to pay for textbooks.

In spring 2020, the committee [surveyed more than 300 faculty members](#) to determine what is important to faculty when selecting course materials. Key findings include:

- Faculty responses related to access codes and "using the book" didn't line up with student perceptions.
- Nearly two-thirds of faculty say they assigned 75-100% of a book.
- Less than 25% of faculty said they assign an access code or e-Textbook.
- Of faculty who assigned an access code, over half of them estimate the cost to students between $50-100.

## Our Project

In the fall of 2020 a group of Milner librarians began to discuss how we could support student success during the pandemic. In the preceding months, many students had suddenly lost access to physical course reserve books on which they relied. Many students and their parents had lost their jobs or were otherwise experiencing financial instability, which meant that even more students than usual were likely going to struggle to afford their textbooks in spring 2021.

The project team decided to save our students money by buying electronic versions of their textbooks through the library and making them available to the entire university community. Serendipitously, ten thousand dollars of one-time funding had just become available when another project was canceled for pandemic-related reasons.

**Class Selection**

Not all textbooks are available in electronic format. Of the textbooks that are, many are only offered for individuals to license, not libraries. When e-textbooks are available for libraries to purchase, publishers frequently place limits on them that restrict the number of concurrent users leading to turn-aways, frustration, and missed deadlines if multiple students attempt to access the same book simultaneously before an assignment is due. Our team found that only

approximately one-third of textbooks assigned in the spring 2021 semester at ISU were available for Milner to purchase. Not all were available with licensing terms that would ensure that an entire class of students could access the book when they need it.

The project team obtained the spring 2021 textbook list from the Office of the University Registrar, searched for the availability of each unique title, and flagged the titles that were available for library purchase with favorable licensing terms. From this list, we generated a list of courses that were eligible candidates for our project. For each of these classes, we took the price of the textbook from the University bookstore, multiplied that cost by the number of students currently enrolled in the class to get an estimate of the amount of money that might be saved by students, then divided the cost of the book to the library to get a benefit-cost ratio (BCR). We ranked our candidate classes by BCR to achieve the maximum financial impact for our students and ran down the list to determine how many classes we could afford to buy books for.

**Recruitment**

The team held back approximately $2,000 of our budget to cover unexpected expenses (miscalculations, the need to purchase a second copy of some books, etc.) and incentives for participant feedback, marked the point on our list at which we would have spent approximately $8,000, and began inviting professors to participate in our research. We sent 92 invitations to 86 professors to participate in our project (some had multiple qualifying courses), representing 135 sections across 68 courses. We had 52 professors agree to participate, while nine declined, and 31 failed to respond to a total of three emails. Ultimately 70 of the invited 135 sections participated across 43 of the 68 courses. A small amount of our funding was used to purchase textbooks for classes whose professors declined to participate.

We asked participating professors to notify their students as quickly as possible that an electronic version of the textbook would be available to them, so they could avoid purchasing a print copy if that's what they preferred to do.

**Implementation**

Milner Library purchased 57 titles and upgraded eight more for a total cost of $7,858.37. Milner already owned nine assigned titles for participating classes with appropriate licenses, and several of the titles used in this study were assigned for more than one class.

If all invited professors had participated and notified students of the textbook's availability, this project had the potential to reach **3,535** students and save them a total of **$238,729.10**. This project reached **2,029** students and gave them the opportunity to save **$143,880.50**.

**Data Collection**

Milner placed access links to the textbooks in each course's ReggieNet page. In April, two faculty focus groups were conducted with a total of 10 participants and two student focus groups with a total of 15 participants. All participants were given a $20 Amazon gift card for their time.

The project team also surveyed students and faculty. Both surveys were opened on March 16 and left open through the end of the semester. Some participating professors offered students a small amount of extra credit in exchange for completing the survey. The findings featured throughout this report capture sentiments shared during the focus groups and surveys.

**Limitations**

The pilot project took place during the global COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of the pandemic on our project and our findings is inextricably linked. Students and faculty raised concerns that connect with the larger reality of online learning during the pandemic. Some student participants presented the challenge of screen fatigue as impacting their use of eTexbooks. Some faculty were also concerned about the comprehension and retention of eText reading for students. Beyond the pandemic, some faculty also noted the importance of having students own particular books that will impact their progression in a major or field.

## Additional Findings

### Less stress for both students and faculty.

"Without the stress of running around to find a textbook at a reasonable price, I was able to dive into the course and semester right away with no hesitation."

"Being a student you have to worry about a lot of things but the material you NEED to excel shouldn't be one of them. Having access to the ebook made that a reality. A reality it took me 3 and a half years to witness."

### Accessibility and portability facilitate learning on the go.

"It makes class material accessible anywhere at any time, which is very helpful when I am traveling as a student-athlete. "

### Easy to use for students and faculty.

"It has made my teaching a lot easier- I am able to access the book from anywhere (if I'd like to brush up on the chapter reading) and I also know that all students have access to the reading."

"I reference this book more than any of my others because it was so easy to use which really helped me in understanding the material."

"It's actually made it so much easier. Like, obviously no one likes having to pay for things, but having a useable resource and all the text I need for the class available in one spot made me much more inclined to do the work. Also, I have difficulty focusing, so highlighting and keywords were a plus."

### Keyword searching made studying and work more efficient.

"I really liked being able to search for key words and the annotating features as it made assignments easier because I could find notes easily."

"Being able to download my books helps me find exactly what material I need in the book because I can search through it faster."

**Goodwill** was generated for the University, the library, and professors.

"Not having to purchase a text has made me appreciate the resources ISU provides, as college can already be really pricey and adding purchase of textbooks is challenging."

"It put this class in a positive light from the beginning that I didn't have to pay hundreds of dollars for a textbook."

"Honestly, when I have to drop a few 100 on textbooks for a class, I walk in bitter. I'm already upset with the class. I don't want to do anything. Tuition is expensive and I don't like paying for unnecessary paper out of pocket. So, having a more positive view toward this class helped my motivation."

"Having access to it helped me to feel supported by my professor, so the work felt like less of a chore and more of a great opportunity to learn."

**Students and faculty want this program to continue.**

"Keep this program forever!"

"It was truly a godsend."

"This is a great program and my students felt like they received a great gift."

"I wish every class made them available for free."

Students Likelihood of registering for courses using library-provided ebooks in the future

| Category | Percentage |
| --- | --- |
| Very likely | 61.6% |
| Somewhat likely | 33.6% |
| Somewhat unlikely | 3.1% |
| Very unlikely | 1.6% |
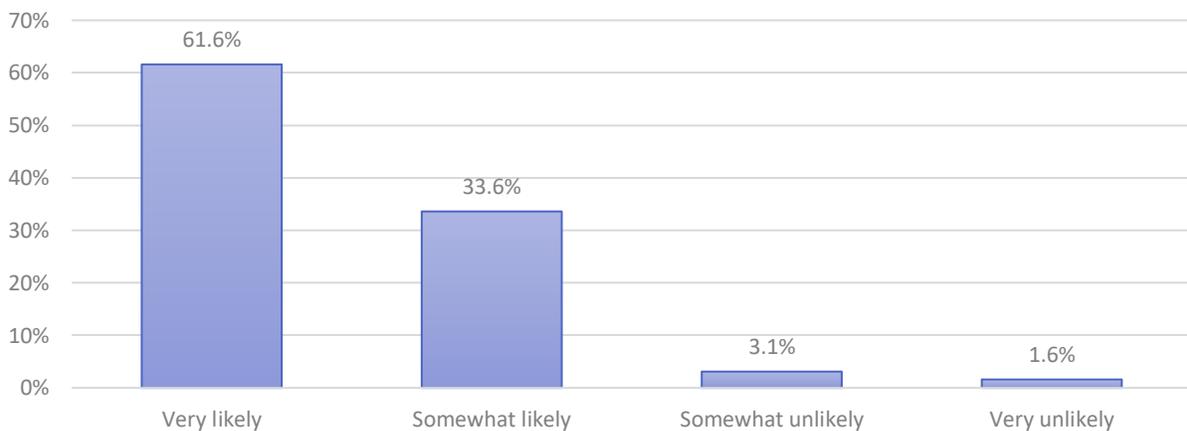
## Next Steps

- Secure a continuing source of funding.
- Market the project to a variety of campus stakeholders.

- o Increase faculty awareness of textbook affordability issues and highlight how Milner Library can connect them to Affordable and Open Educational Resources, respecting their academic freedom and understanding that faculty are the arbiters of which textbook they use.
- Collaborate with campus partners to integrate links to licensed eTexts into Course Finder.
- Develop and refine library workflows.
- Nurture campus-wide partnerships to support textbook affordability and student success.

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