



All Musselman Library Staff Works

Musselman Library Staff Works

4-21-2023

Spend, Stress, and Struggle: Gettysburg College Student Textbook and Course Materials Survey 2022

Janelle Wertzberger
Gettysburg College

Mary Elmquist
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/librarypubs>



Part of the [Scholarly Communication Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Recommended Citation

Wertzberger, Janelle and Elmquist, Mary, "Spend, Stress, and Struggle: Gettysburg College Student Textbook and Course Materials Survey 2022" (2023). *All Musselman Library Staff Works*. 168.
<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/librarypubs/168>

This open access presentation is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Spend, Stress, and Struggle: Gettysburg College Student Textbook and Course Materials Survey 2022

Abstract

In Fall 2022, Musselman Library conducted its second course materials survey—this time, in collaboration with 10 other liberal arts colleges from around the country. The results from this new survey illuminate how students are affected by textbook and course material costs, how they cope with these costs, and how effects and behaviors have changed since our 2019 survey. We also examine how our students fit into a larger landscape of textbook affordability at similar institutions.

Keywords

textbooks, textbook survey

Disciplines

Scholarly Communication

Creative Commons License



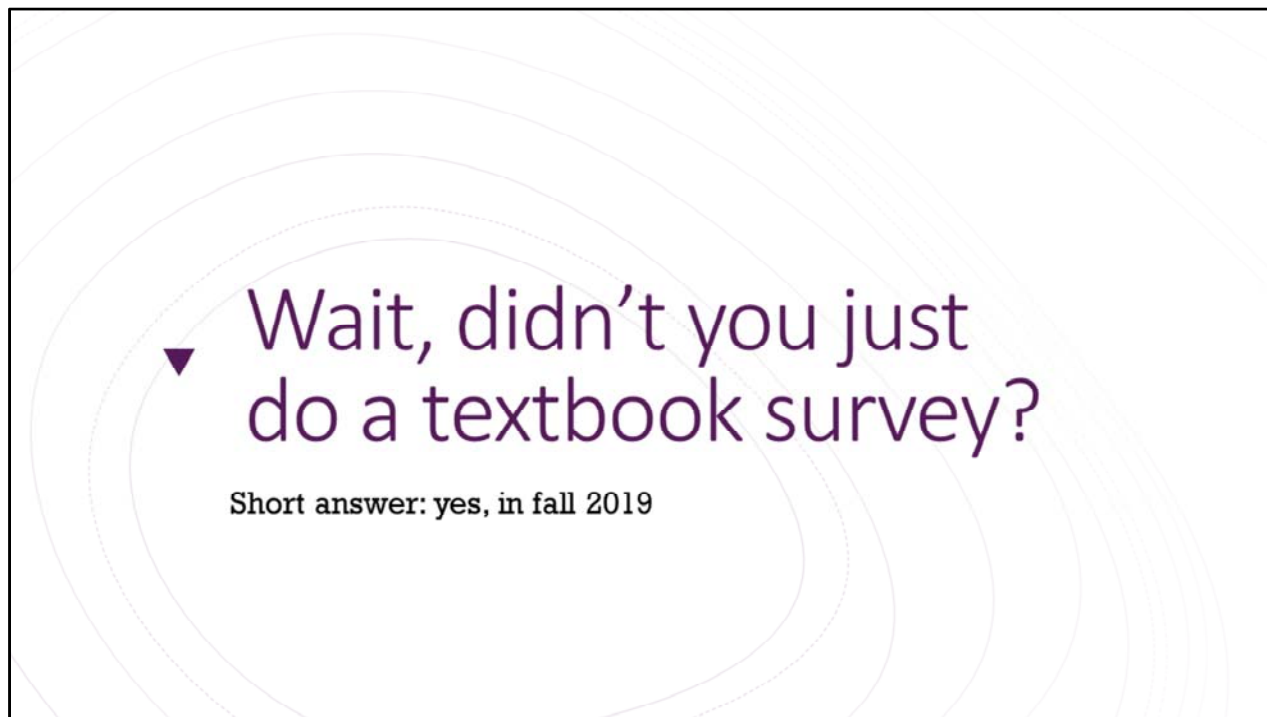
This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Spend, Stress, and Struggle:

Gettysburg College Student Textbook and Course Materials Survey 2022

Janelle Wertzberger (she/her) and Mary Elmquist (she/they), Musselman Library
April 21, 2023

JANELLE
Introductions



Folks with good memories may recall that we conducted a student textbook survey in Fall 2019, and reported the results in late February, 2020. We all know what happened in March, so we forgive you if you forgot everything about it. If you're interested in that project, you can find an executive summary of the results, the slide deck from our 2020 Friday Forum presentation, and a peer-reviewed journal article in *The Cupola*.

We decided to repeat the survey because we heard from Krystie Wilfong, a librarian colleague at Bates College (who also happens to be a Gettysburg alumna, class of 2008). Krystie wanted to administer a similar survey and initially just wanted to learn more about how we did it. But as our conversation deepened, Krystie suggested that we invite more institutions to participate so we could draw broader conclusions about the impact of textbook costs on our students.

The libraries at Bates and Gettysburg are both members of a consortium called the Oberlin Group of Libraries, which has 83 members at so-called "leading" liberal arts colleges around the country (including, of course, Oberlin College). We put a call out to the group to see who wanted to collaborate with us and ultimately joined with 9 other libraries.

Research questions and methodology



How much money do students spend on textbooks and required course materials?



What strategies do students use to reduce textbook costs?



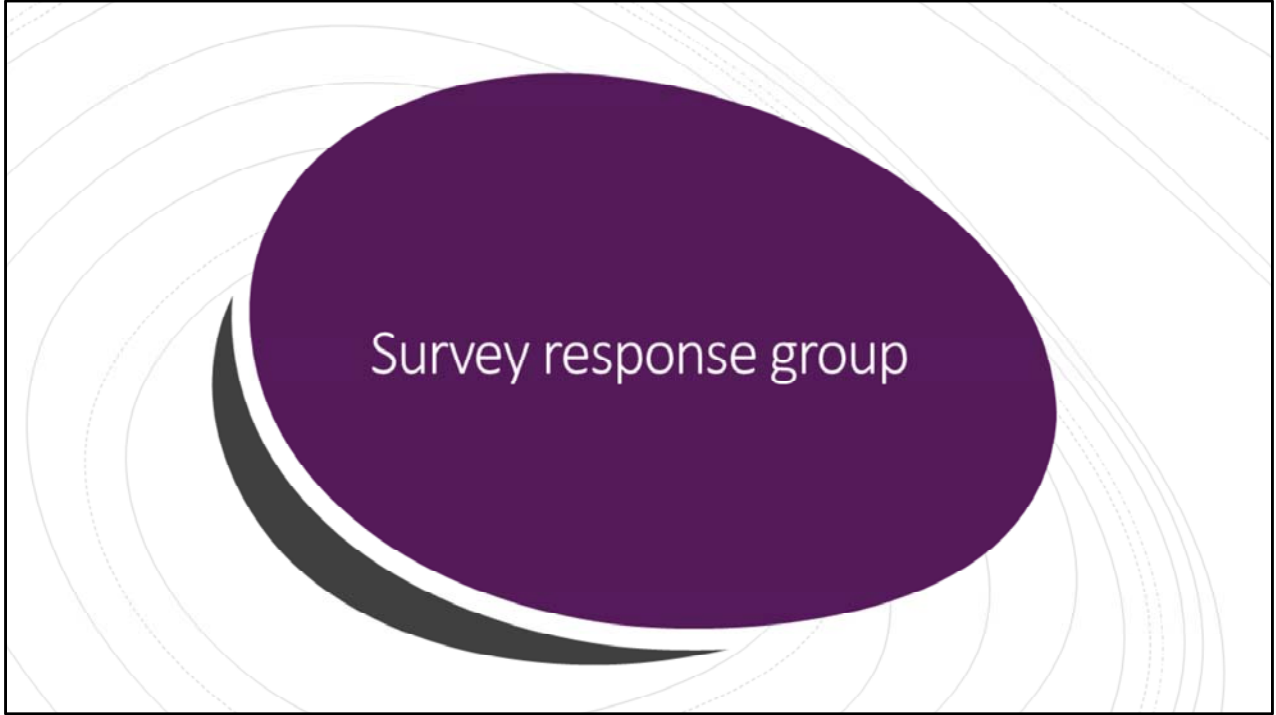
How are students affected by textbook costs?

Our research questions were straightforward. We wanted to know:

- how much money students spend on textbooks and other required course materials,
- what strategies they use to reduce costs, and
- how they are affected by those costs.

These are the same research questions that we asked in 2019. We were curious to know how the pandemic impacted these issues on our own campus, and also how textbook costs impact students at other campuses that are similar to Gettysburg. The ultimate goal was to provide local context for Mary's and my work in supporting faculty who wish to reduce or eliminate the cost of course materials for students.

We asked nine questions related to course materials, and students could choose all responses that applied to them.



You're probably wondering who the other schools in the group were...

Participants and response rate

| Institution | Student population | Response rate |
|-------------------|--------------------|---------------|
| Bates | 1821 | 22% |
| Colby | 2305 | 34% |
| Connecticut | 1948 | 16% |
| Gettysburg | 2378 | 16% |
| Haverford | 1420 | 12% |
| Lafayette | 2725 | 9% |
| Macalester | 2154 | 22% |
| Middlebury | 2773 | 3% |
| Mt Holyoke | 2193 | 16% |
| Skidmore | 2728 | 5% |
| Sewanee | 1608 | 14% |

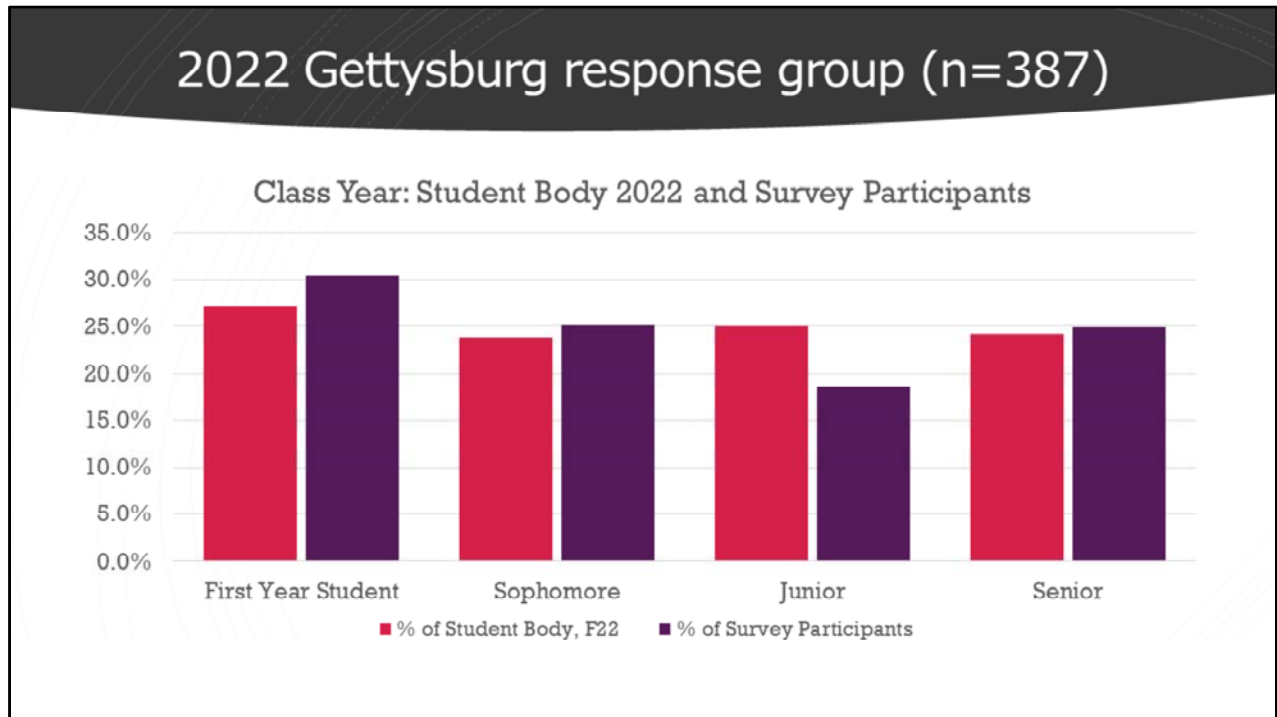
Here are the 11 institutions that participated in the survey, along with their effective response rates: Bates, Colby, Connecticut, Gettysburg, Haverford, Lafayette, Macalester, Middlebury, Mount Holyoke, Skidmore, and Sewanee.

Let me say a little bit more about our methodology here. Rather than employing a *random* representational sampling method, we encouraged *all* students to complete the survey. Promotional efforts varied by institution and that really shows up in the response rate.

Middlebury had the lowest response rate at 3% of its student body, while Colby had the most with 34% (they were able to utilize an “all student” email address as part of their promotion). The overall response rate across all institutions is 15%, and Gettysburg’s response rate was 16%, which interestingly is exactly what it was in 2019.

There is variation in response rates and survey counts by school, so the total results reflect those higher-count schools. This doesn’t meaningfully impact any overall conclusions, but it did tell us that it would not be wise for us to compare schools. So you’ll hear us talking about “Gettysburg results” and “group results,” but we won’t be comparing, for example, Gettysburg to Lafayette.

2022 Gettysburg response group (n=387)



Let's dig into the Gettysburg results a little more. We had 484 returned surveys and only 387 contained data. While the "n" is lower for the 2022 survey than it was in 2019, the response rate is consistent at 16.x%.

Unfortunately, we didn't reach the magical 30% response rate that would assure us that our response group likely represents the overall student body, so we made some other comparisons to determine whether or how representative our response group is.

CLICK By class year, our responses are fairly close to the entire student body. Back in 2019, first-year students were overrepresented in the response group and they are *still a bit* overrepresented, but senior and sophomore response rates now more closely match the population. It's worth noting that first-year students in 2019 became the seniors of fall 2022, assuming they stayed enrolled during the pandemic years. We wonder if some of those students remembered taking the survey in 2019 and wanted to weigh in again as seniors. Responses were anonymous, so we can't know for sure.

We also looked at various demographic groups and found that some student groups were overrepresented in the response group. Specifically, international students, students studying off-campus, women, first-generation students, and Pell grant

recipients were overrepresented in survey responses.

| Demographic comparisons: Gettysburg 2022 | | |
|--|--------------|----------------|
| | Student Body | Response Group |
| First-Gen Students | ≈20% | 32.6% |

| Demographic comparisons: Response groups | | | |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | Gettysburg 2022 | Gettysburg 2019 | Consortium 2022 |
| First-Gen | 32.6% | 25.3% | 22.7% |

First-generation students

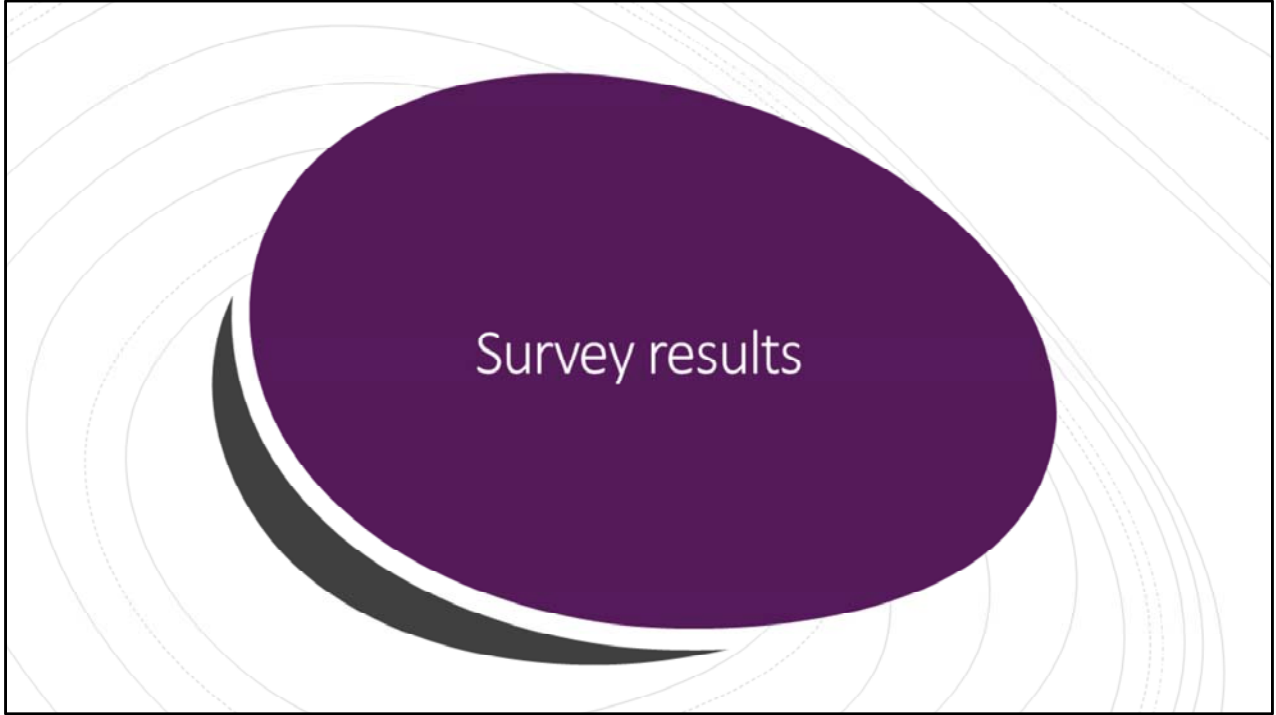
One of our research questions is about how students are affected by textbook costs, and in 2019, we learned that first-generation students and Pell grant recipients experienced more negative impact of costs and employed more strategies to cut costs. For today, we're going to focus on our first-gen students, as that is where we've found the most noticeable differences and changes. However, we have *way* more data than we have time to cover today. Keep an eye out, as we plan to share a more comprehensive report soon!

You can see here that in 2022, we had a higher percentage of 1G responses in the survey group than we have in our total student population – this suggests that these students were motivated to make their voices heard through the survey.

How does this look compared to the Gettysburg 2019 responses? What about the larger group surveyed in 2022? **CLICK**

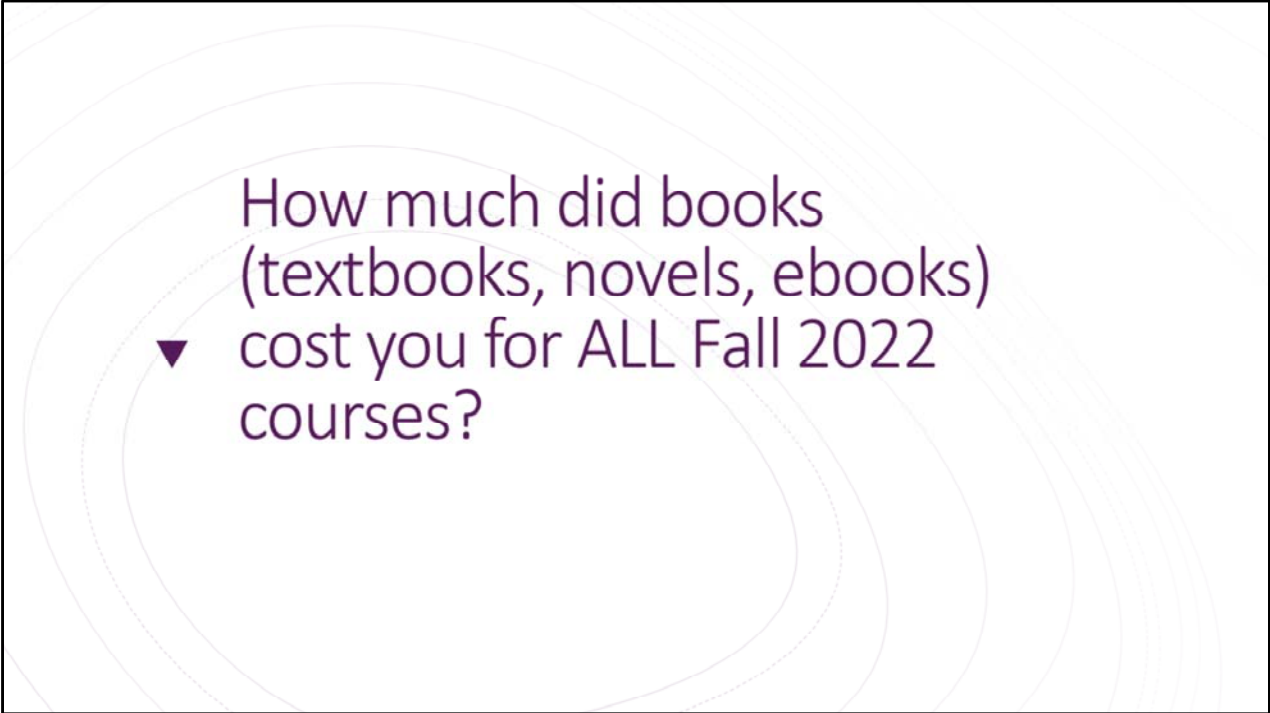
You can see here that the Gettysburg 2022 first-gen responses were higher than they were here at Gettysburg in 2019. They were even higher than those populations in the larger group in 2022. What are we to make of this?

The only conclusion we can safely draw from these data is that our first-gen students were especially motivated to make their voices heard in fall 2022... more motivated than they were in fall 2019, and a LOT more motivated than their counterparts across the 11 institutions in the larger group. This tells me that our campus focus on this population is rightfully placed, and that even more resources and attention are needed to ensure that their needs are met. We will hear more directly from individual first-gen respondents as we dig into the results, which Mary is going to take us through.



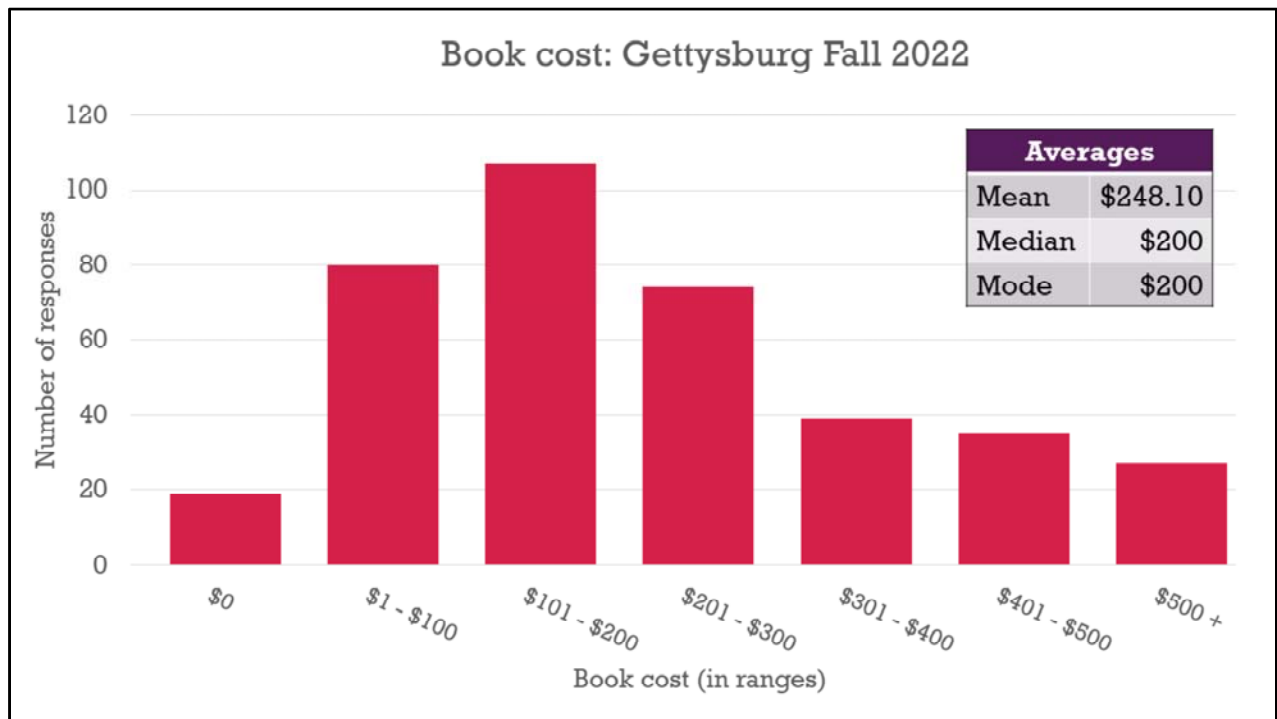
MARY

On to our results! Things are about to get pretty numbers-heavy for a minute here, so please bear with me! There's a lot to be learned in these numbers!



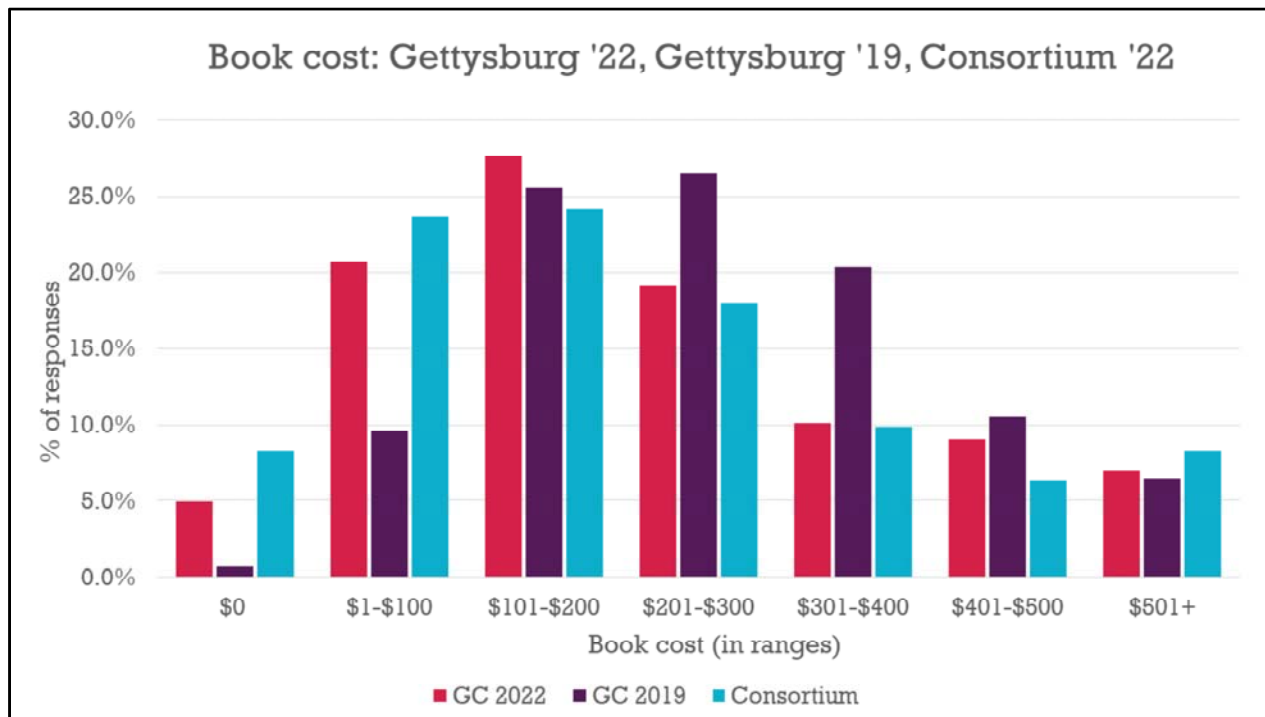
How much did books
(textbooks, novels, ebooks)
▼ cost you for ALL Fall 2022
courses?

We started by asking about how much students spent on their books for Fall '22. Participants were asked to give a dollar value, so some folks rounded, and some gave very precise answers.



We categorized responses to this question into ranges to make our data easier to visualize. As you can see, the largest group was those who reported spending something in the 100-200 dollar range, with about 28% of respondents in this category. While most fell into the middle here, we did have some on either end, with about 20 students reporting they didn't spend anything, and just under 30 saying they spent over 500 dollars.

[click] For the curious, the mean was \$248.10 across all respondents, while the median and most frequent responses to this question were both \$200.

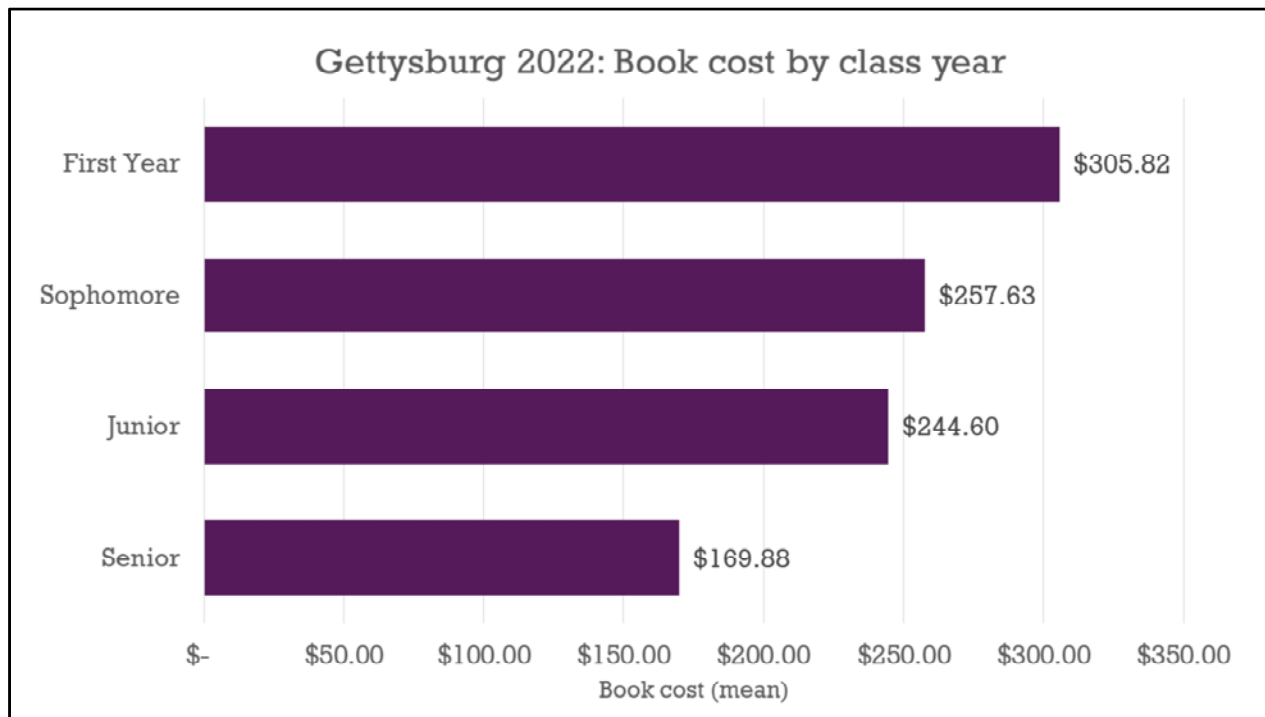


We compared responses across these ranges to both the responses from our 2019 survey—which are represented in the middle in these groups of three columns—and to the wider group of collaborators in the consortium [of liberal arts colleges] which are on the right.

To start by comparing 2022 to 2019: All averages have decreased, with the mean dropping by about \$35, and the most frequent response dropping from \$300 to \$200. As you can see, we also have a noticeable jump in the number of students saying they didn't spend anything, which is great!

In comparison to the larger consortium group, Gettysburg students pay about \$10 more on average.

Our takeaway: GC students are paying less in 2022 than in 2019 (good!) but still more than large group (disappointing) – moving in the right direction, but not there yet.



Coming back to just the Gettysburg 2022 group, we found that the mean reported cost of books varied significantly by class year. First year students reported spending the most at \$305.82, and the mean decreased year-to-year, with seniors reporting spending nearly half as much as first years, at \$169.88.

(For the curious, medians also drop from year-to-year, with the FY median at \$255 and the seniors at \$150)

This is the same pattern we saw in 2019, and there's probably a few things that contribute here. First years are most likely to be assigned those big expensive textbooks and access codes, but they're also the least experienced at navigating the textbook market, and may not yet have learned the strategies used by upper-class students.

| Class year | First-gen | | Not first-gen | |
|-------------------|-----------|----|---------------|----|
| | Mean | N | Mean | N |
| First year | 371.84 | 32 | 277.31 | 81 |
| Sophomore | 314.27 | 30 | 227.10 | 61 |
| Junior | 344.13 | 24 | 192.67 | 46 |
| Senior | 198.28 | 36 | 141.51 | 55 |

First-gen students pay more

We also found that student spend varied significantly based on first-generation student status. First-generation students spent an average of about \$80 more than those who were not first-gen. This extends over all class years—our first-gen students appear to start at a disadvantage, and while the gap closes some, they never quite catch up to their peers.

“As a first Gen student it’s very hard to know what you need and what you can get for free there aren’t people teaching the ins and out about how to afford books and other resources”



And this was backed up by comments we received: “As a first Gen student it’s very hard to know what you need and what you can get for free there aren’t people teaching the ins and out about how to afford books and other resources”

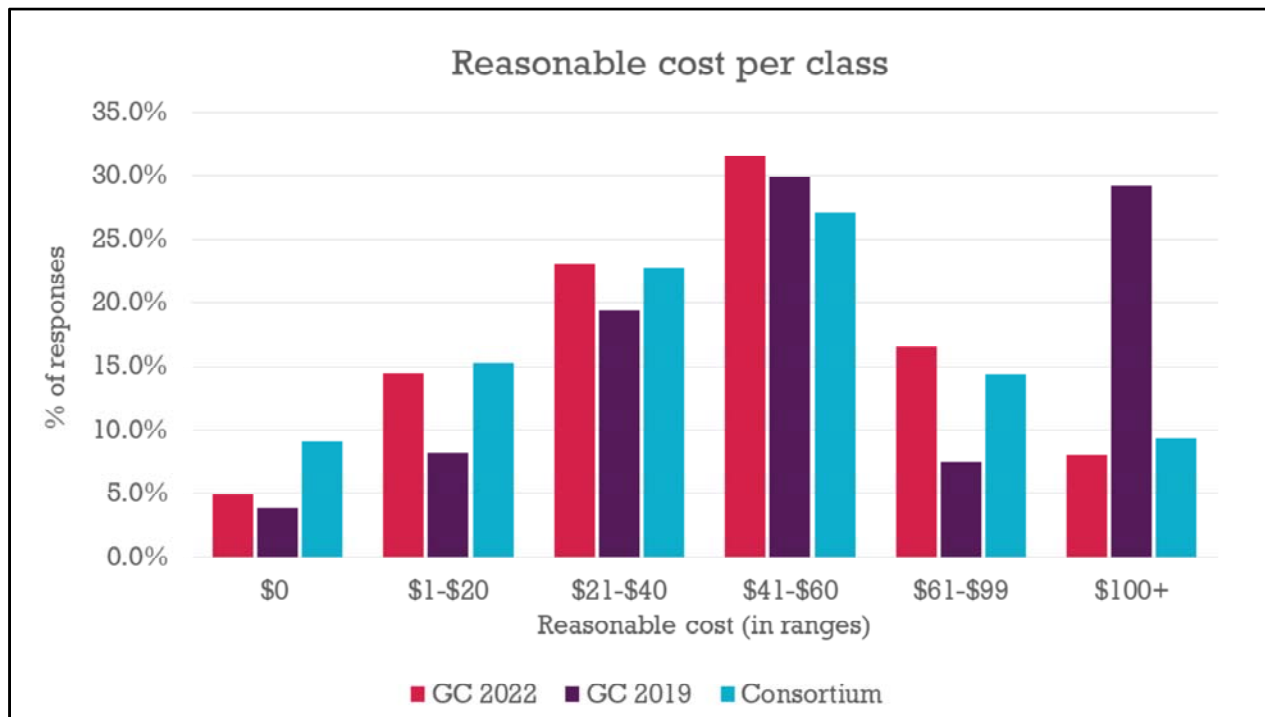


▼ How much do you feel is reasonable to pay for all books and required course materials for a SINGLE class?

In our next question, we asked students about what they felt would be a reasonable cost for all materials for a *single* class, be that one big, Capital-T Textbook, or several smaller texts. Again, we asked for responses in whole numbers.

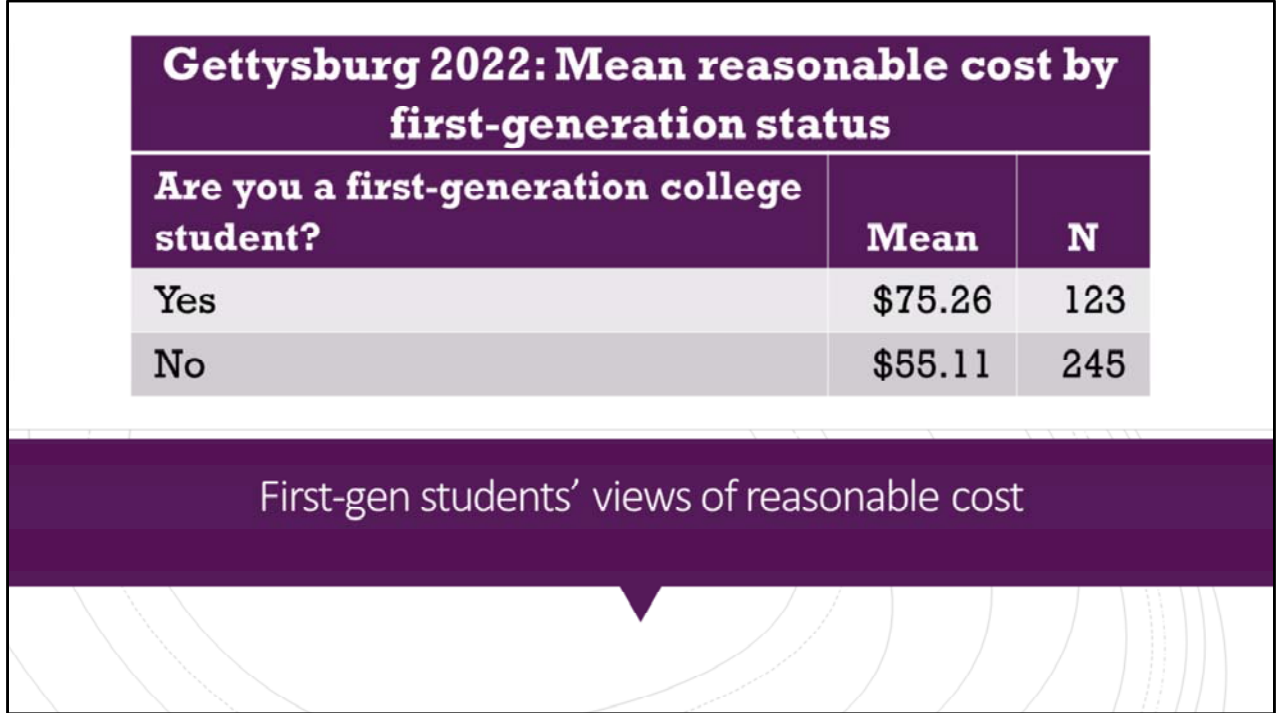


When the responses were categorized, the largest number of responses fell in the 40-60 dollar range **click** and \$50 was both the median and most common response to this question.



This \$50 number had consistency across years and groups, too. \$50 was the median in 2019 and among our consortium, too.

The biggest difference we saw was a drop in the mean response between Gettysburg in 2019 and Gettysburg in 2022. Looking at this chart, you might be able to see where that came from – we saw a lot fewer students saying that \$100 per class was a reasonable cost this time around.



We again saw a significant difference in the way that first-generation students responded to this question in comparison to their peers: On average, first-gen students said about \$75 was a reasonable cost—about \$20 higher than non-first-gen respondents.

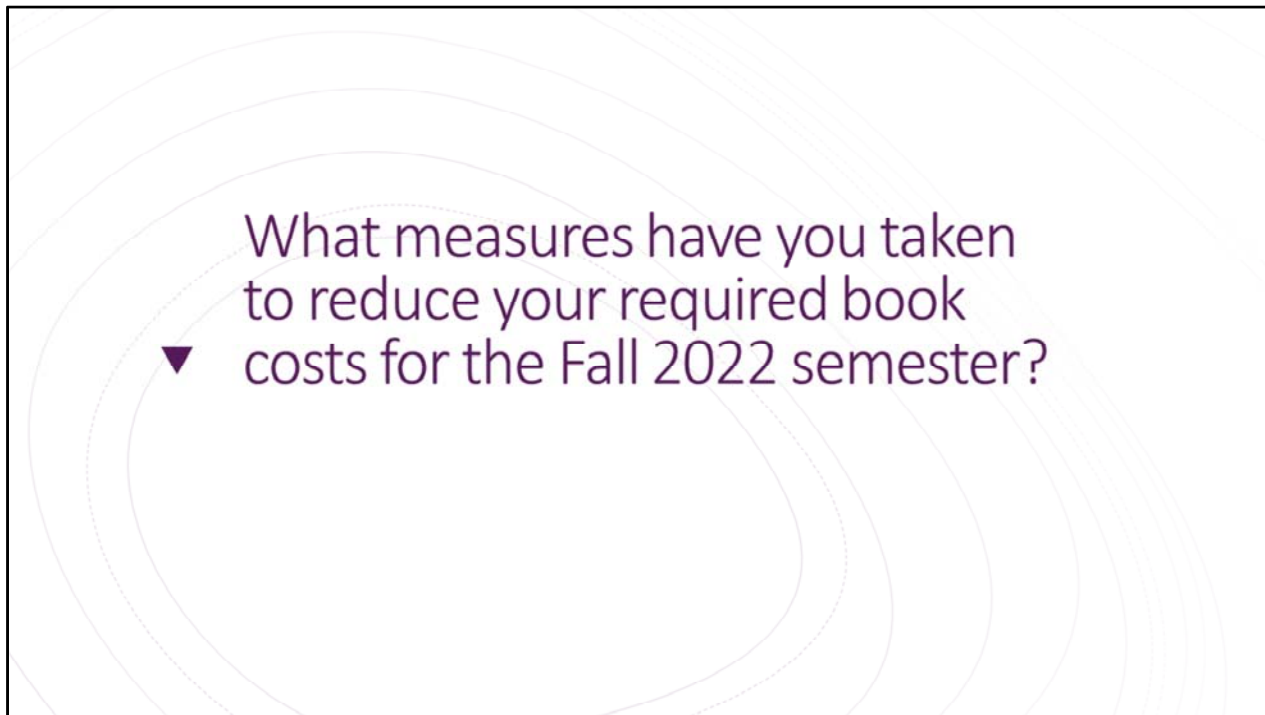
While we can't really explain this without further research, we can speculate that it might tie back to the issue of how much more first-gen students are spending. If you're used to spending more, why wouldn't that affect how much you think you *should* be spending?

I want to add now that this phenomenon of first-gen students both spending more and saying more is reasonable are new to our 2022 results. We did not see this relationship in 2019. Again, we can't explain this at the moment—it's just two data points—but it's something we'll want to keep an eye on in the future.

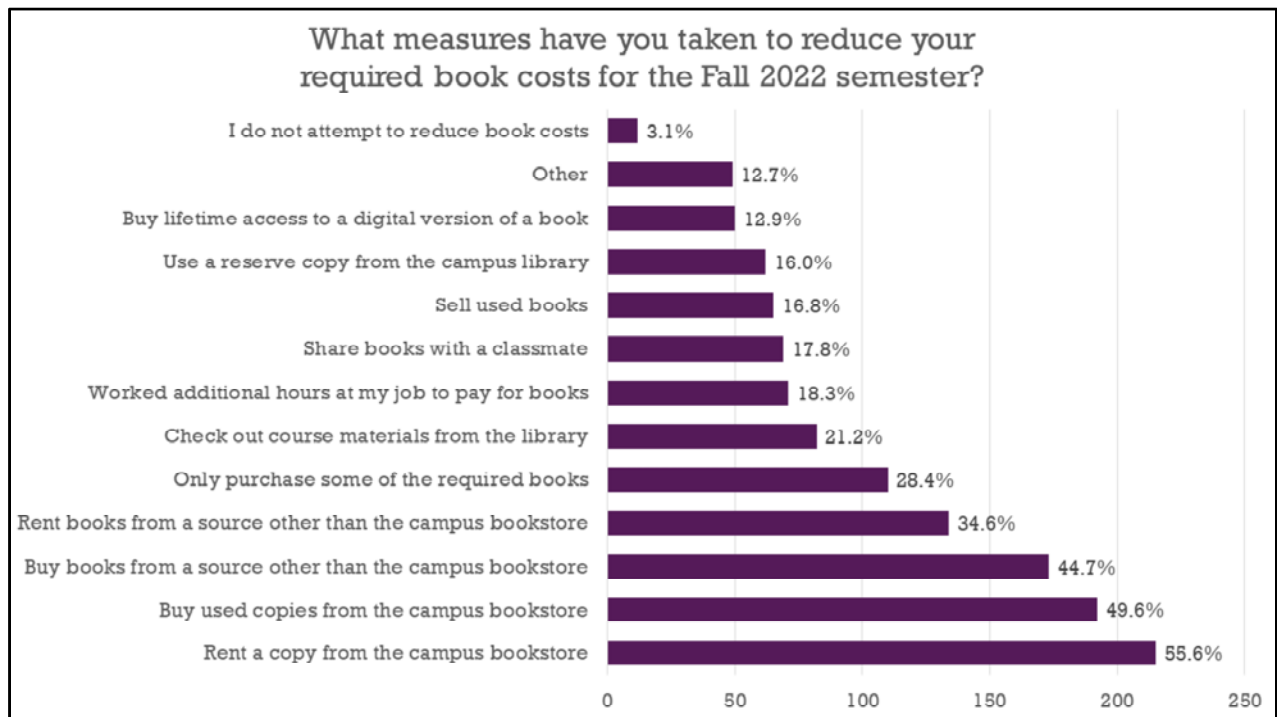
“Intro level STEM classes have the most expensive books and online access costs that it makes it hard to afford for first Gen students and students of marginalized communities. Also professors need to know that we are not them, we most likely don’t have the income to afford to be an academic we are fighting a system that is not meant for us.”



All that said, students are aware that these systems are putting them at a disadvantage in comparison to their peers. Like this student who said: “Intro level STEM classes have the most expensive books and online access costs that it makes it hard to afford for first-gen students and students of marginalized communities. Also professors need to know that we are not them, we most likely don’t have the income to afford to be an academic we are fighting a system that is not meant for us.”



After this, we shifted to asking about the strategies students use to save money when purchasing their books.



So, this question had 11 different strategies that students could choose from (as well as an “other” option.) It’s all here, but we don’t expect you to take it all in just now; our slides are already available in The Cupola!

A few highlights I want to call out:

- Only 3% of respondent reported that they didn’t do anything to bring down the cost of their books.
- Our students still turn to the bookstore first—the most common strategies across the whole group are renting and buying used from the campus bookstore.

And I want to dig into a couple of these strategies a little deeper, but first I want to call attention to the “Other” response category. We asked participants to expand on this response when they chose it, and when we looked at those responses, we saw a pattern emerge pretty quickly.

“Piracy is free and moral”



[read quote] “Piracy is free and moral”

And I do want to make absolutely clear that this is a student quote, and not an official stance from the library, Janelle, or myself!

Okay, now I’d like to shift gears to talk about some of the other strategies students said they were using, and make some other comparisons between 2022 and 2019.

| Measures to reduce cost (Gettysburg 22 vs Gettysburg 19) | | |
|--|---------|---------|
| Measure to Reduce Costs | GC22 | GC19 |
| | Percent | Percent |
| Only purchase some of the required books | 28.4% | 15.8% |
| Share books with classmate | 17.8% | 16.4% |
| Check out course materials from the library | 21.2% | 11.6% |
| Use a reserve copy from the campus library | 16% | 7.3% |

Across the board, we found that students are employing cost-reduction measures more now than in 2019. Although I've pulled out just a few highlights to look at here, I want to emphasize that almost **every** category saw some increase over 2019. The only responses where we saw any decrease was in students acquiring their books from sources other than the bookstore and in selling back used books to recoup costs.

Of most concerning: we see quite a jump in students using one of the most dire measures we looked at, with almost twice the percentage saying they only buy some of their required books.

On the positive side, we see some of the ways they might be supplementing when they don't buy books, and they're not all bad. Students in 2022 say they're using library resources way more than they did just 3 years ago. And we *didn't* see an increase in students sharing books with their classmates as a coping strategy—also good!

| Gettysburg 2022: Measures to reduce cost (First-gen status) | | |
|--|---------------------------|-----------|
| What measures have you taken to reduce your required book costs for the Fall 2022 semester? | First-gen student? | |
| | Yes | No |
| Only purchase some of the required books | 33.3% | 26.6% |
| Share books with classmate | 22.2% | 15.3% |
| Check out course materials from the library | 28.6% | 16.5% |
| Use a reserve copy from the campus library | 22.2% | 12.9% |

We chose specifically to look at two of these responses—students who said they only purchased some of their required books and those who shared books with classmates—because in Fall 19, first-gen students were more likely to say they used both of these strategies. And we see the same thing this time around.

But positively, we see that these students are even more likely to say they use library resources as a cost saving measure than non-first-gen students. Admittedly, this is very exciting for us—and a great chance for us to say “Thank you!” to the OME, who have been fantastic partners in reaching out to first-gen students especially to help raise awareness of textbook affordability resources that are available through the library and elsewhere!

| Gettysburg 2022 vs 2019: Measures to reduce cost (First-gen status) | | | | |
|--|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|
| What measures have you taken to reduce your required book costs for the Fall 2022 semester? | 2022 | | 2019 | |
| | 1G | Not 1G | 1G | Not 1G |
| Only purchase some of the required books | 33.3% | 26.6% | 18.8% | 15.0% |
| Share books with classmate | 22.2% | 15.3% | 20.5% | 13.7% |
| Check out course materials from the library | 28.6% | 16.5% | 11.6% | 11.3% |
| Use a reserve copy from the campus library | 22.2% | 12.9% | 6.3% | 7.3% |

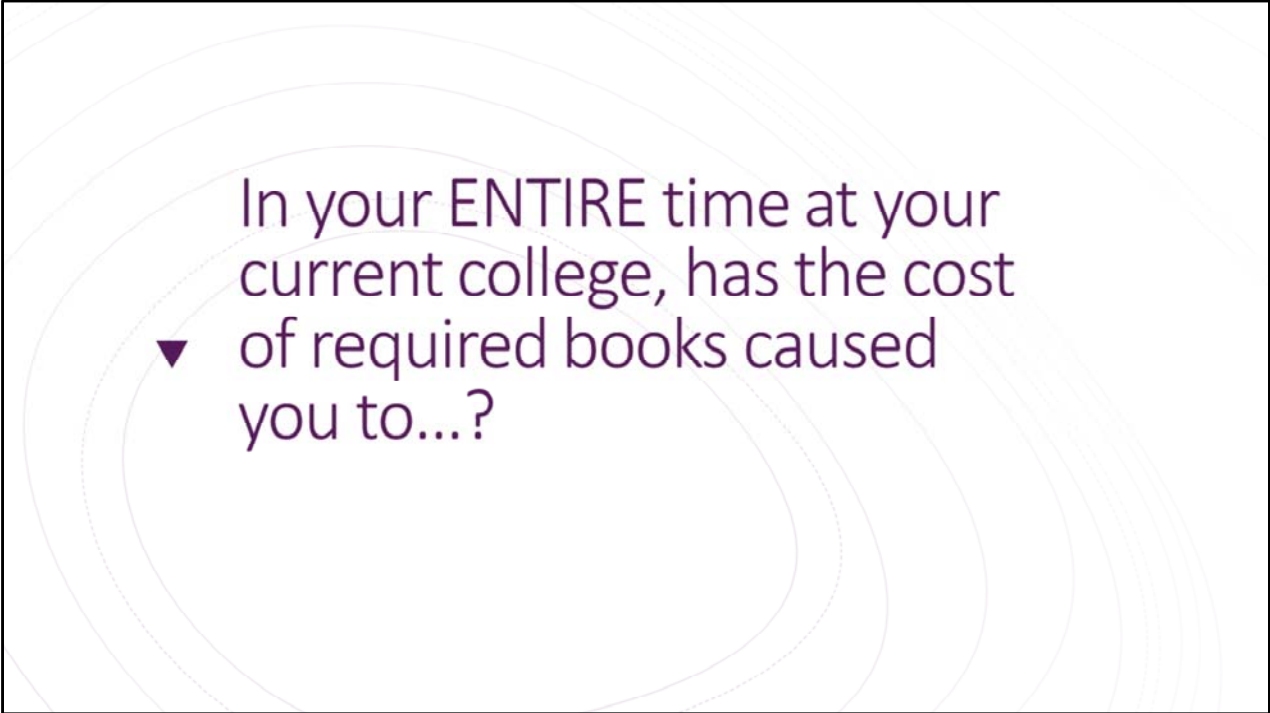
Now, here we can compare what we saw among first-gen students in 2022 with what they said in 2019. A few key takeaways:

- We saw with the comparisons across the whole response groups from both years that there's a higher percentage of respondents saying they use these strategies. Proportionally, the difference between first-gen and non-first-gen in the first two categories hasn't changed much between 2019 and 2022—it's more that the overall percentage has gone up for all students.
- On the other hand, we see a big jump in the overall percentage in the use of library materials, but also, proportionally, that way more first-gen students using these resources than non-first-gen, which is something we didn't see in 2019. Again, in the library, we love to see it!

“Some of my professors asked me to buy all new textbooks so we could write in them. This meant [this one] class ended up costing upwards of \$220”



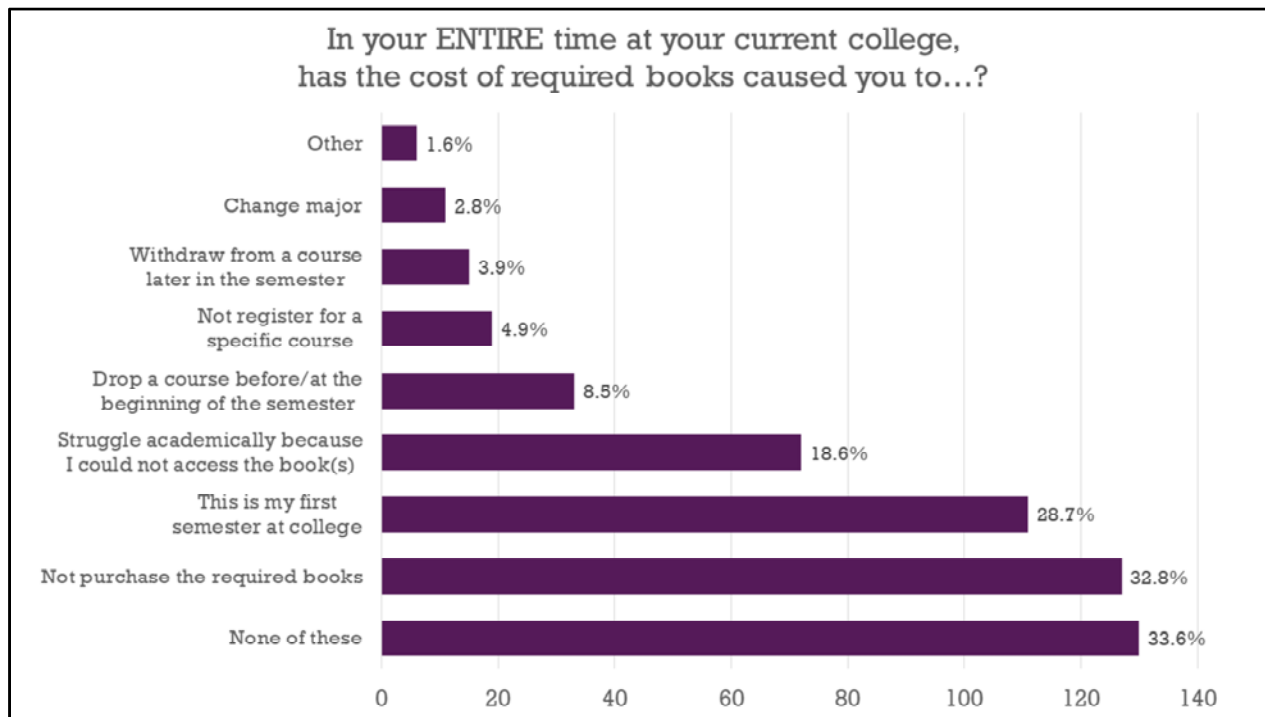
I want to note that, although I've focused on a particular few coping strategies today for the sake of time, it's really the combination of *all* of these things that often makes the most difference for students. We heard from students that restrictions on renting or buying used books could really put a damper on their ability to save, like this student who said: “Some of my professors asked me to buy all new textbooks so we could write in them. This meant [this one] class ended up costing upwards of \$220”



In your ENTIRE time at your current college, has the cost of required books caused you to...?

- ▼

Okay, for our next question we asked about what effects students had felt from the costs of their books. It's important to note that this asks about their whole career, so where some of the available responses are similar, we do get different answers.



Students had six available effects to choose from. To sum up a few key takeaways:

- We see that the most common answer is that students haven't felt any of these effects. This is positive...but it does still account for only 1/3 of responses.
- Another almost 30% said that they were in their first semester, so those folks are less likely to have experienced these effects yet. Still, 24 first years (about 20% of all FY respondents) did report at least one effect.
- We see that almost 1/3 of students have elected not to purchase required books because of costs sometime in their college career, and about 19% have said that they have struggled academically because of cost.

So how do these numbers compare to 2019?

| Effects of textbook costs (Gettysburg 22 vs Gettysburg 19) | | |
|---|-------------|-------------|
| Cost of required books caused you to... | GC22 | GC19 |
| | % | % |
| Not purchase the required books | 32.8% | 24.2% |
| Struggle academically because I could not access the book(s) | 18.6% | 14.6% |
| None of these | 33.6% | 39.7% |

It's not great. As you can see, the percentage of respondents who said they didn't buy required books or struggled academically have risen noticeably since 2019. And the number of students saying they haven't felt any negative effects from textbook costs has gone down.

Now, it's worth noting again that this is across students' whole college careers. And for most of our students, that career overlaps with the ongoing effects of COVID-19 on people's personal and financial lives. But we also know the effects of COVID have been disproportionate across communities...

| Gettysburg 2022: Effects of costs (First-gen status) | | |
|--|--------------------|-------|
| Cost of required books caused you to... | First-gen student? | |
| | Yes | No |
| Not purchase the required books | 42.9% | 28.3% |
| Struggle academically because I could not access the book(s) | 33.3% | 10.5% |
| None of these | 21.4% | 40.5% |

And again, when we look at first-generation students, the numbers look pretty rough in 2022. First-gen students are significantly more likely than non-first-gen to say they've not purchased books, and over three times more likely to say they've struggled academically because of cost. And they're just more likely to have experienced some effect, with only about 20% saying they haven't experienced any of the options

And although it's not on this slide, I want to mention that we also saw some big differences in the *really* drastic effects that students reported on. The overall number of students responding in those categories are lower, so none of this is statistically significant, but we thought it was worth mentioning. First-gen students were about three times more likely to report that they'd dropped a course or chosen not to take a class because of costs. And *all but one* of the respondents who said they'd changed majors because of the cost of materials were first-gen.

What are we saying to our first-gen students when some of them feel the need to make choices about what classes to take or about their *major* based on textbook cost?

| Gettysburg 2022 vs 2019: Effects of textbook costs (First-gen status) | | | | |
|--|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|
| Cost of required books caused you to... | 2022 | | 2019 | |
| | 1G | Not 1G | 1G | Not 1G |
| Not purchase the required books | 42.9% | 28.3% | 30.4% | 21.1% |
| Struggle academically because I could not access the book(s) | 33.3% | 10.5% | 22.3% | 11.1% |
| None | 21.4% | 40.5% | 27.7% | 45.1% |

And while we saw that some gaps might be decreasing in the coping strategies students used, when it comes to effects, the gaps are only widening in comparison to 2019 for first-generation students. Again, all students have felt these effects more, but when you compare 2022 to 2019, it seems like these years of pandemic have really hit our first-gen students harder than their counterparts.

“My girlfriend almost had to drop a course because she could not afford a singular 300 dollar ... textbook for a 100 level class. That is absolutely ridiculous and extremely unfair.”



So, what does this all sound like in a practical context? From one student: **[read quote]**

“The cost of textbooks has caused severe financial instability for me and my family in the past.”



And from another: “The cost of textbooks has caused severe financial instability for me and my family in the past.”

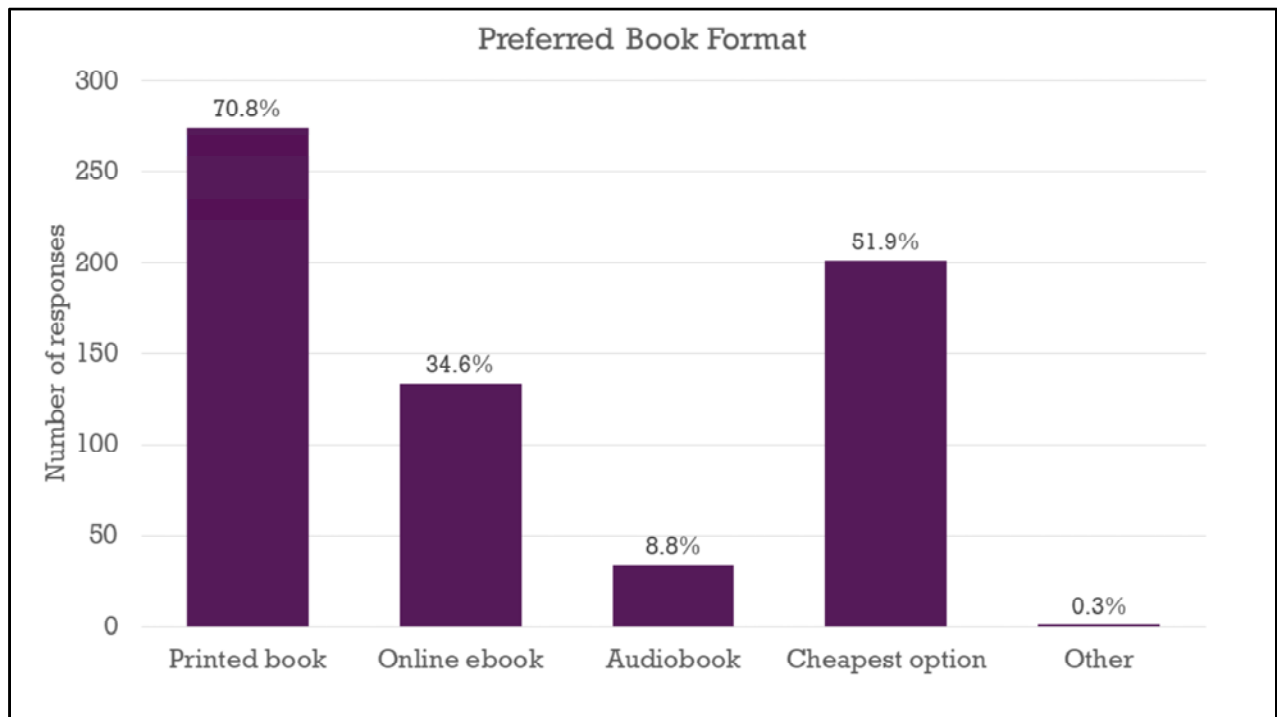
So, I’m going to hand things back to Janelle, who can hopefully steer us away from the huge-bummer-town where I’ve left us for now.



▼ Which book formats
do you prefer?

JANELLE

I'm going to walk us through the results for the last few questions we asked. We find that instructors are perpetually interested in book formats and often have their own individual preferences about what is best for learning, so we wanted to ask students which format they prefer.



...and the results may surprise you. 70% of our student respondents said they preferred printed books, not ebooks or audiobooks! However, over half said they actually prefer whichever option is cheaper. (Remember, students could choose all responses that applied to them.)

This isn't represented in the slide, but compared to our 2019 responses, *fewer* students expressed a preference for printed books (about 15% fewer). Perhaps the COVID-induced period of online learning helped students feel more comfortable with digital texts.

“Classes that require students to purchase books, rather than textbooks, consistently have lower costs, higher resale value at the end of the semester, and make borrowing from the library easier. I would like to see more classes use those instead of textbooks.”



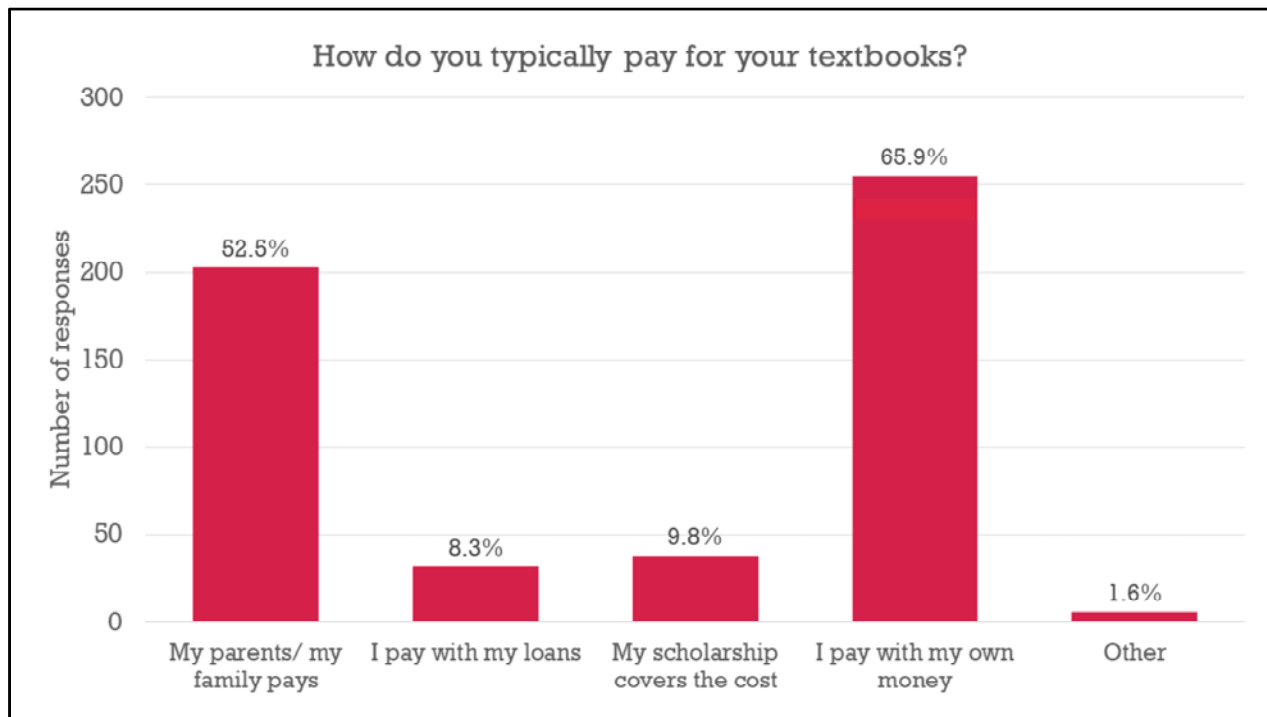
One savvy student shared: “Classes that require students to purchase books, rather than textbooks, consistently have lower costs, higher resale value at the end of the semester, and make borrowing from the library easier. I would like to see more classes use those instead of textbooks.”

This is a nuance of “book format” that we didn’t anticipate learning about, but we were impressed by this student’s insight.



▼ How do you typically
pay for your
textbooks?

We also asked students how they PAY for textbooks. This is a completely new question we added this year, so we don't have comparisons to make between 2019 and 2022 results.



About 65% of students pay for books and course materials with their own money, and just over half say that their parents or family pays. Note that scholarships and loans are NOT a large source of funding for textbooks. But the most interesting thing about these data is that students who used scholarships and loans to buy books actually paid more for their books.



Let me show you what I mean. This slide is a mashup of results from the “how do you pay” question and the “how much did you spend” question.

For students whose scholarships cover the cost of their books, the average amount spent is just over \$400 for the fall 2022 semester. Compare that to students who do NOT have scholarships to pay for their books – so presumably they are paying out of pocket, or with family funds – the average amount spent by these students is only \$233. That is a big difference. Why???

We speculate it’s because students who pay with scholarships/loans are often restricted to campus bookstore, where prices tend to be higher and format options are often fewer.



Let's look at another one of these interesting data mashups – this slide combines results from the “how do you pay” question and the “what is a reasonable cost” question.

Students whose scholarships pay for their books say that the reasonable cost of course materials for one class is about \$90, while students who pay using other means say reasonable cost is more like \$60.

What is “reasonable” differs quite a lot depending on who is paying.



Let's look at this same comparison between "how do you pay" and "reasonable cost" from another angle.

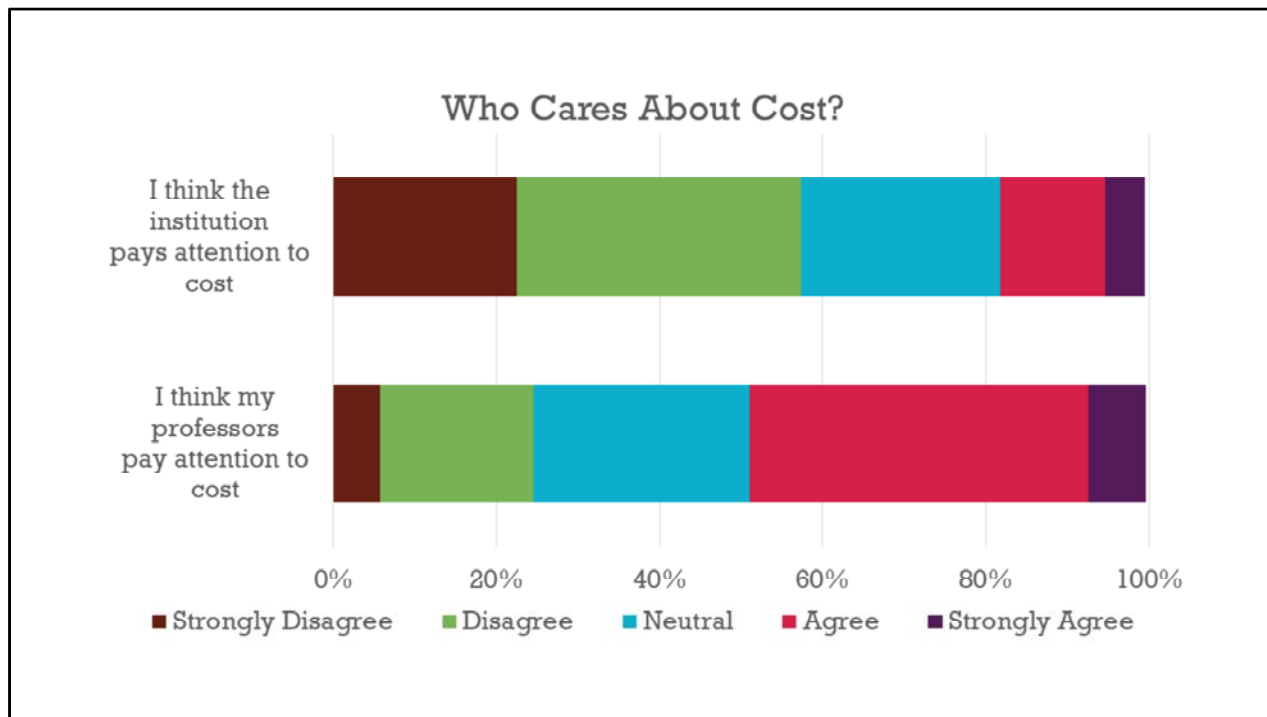
Students who pay for books with their own money say \$55 is a reasonable cost per course, while students who do not pay with their own money say \$76 is reasonable.

Who pays for books is a big predictor of reasonable cost.



▼ Do you think the institution / your professors pay attention to the cost of course materials and work to make them more affordable?

Finally, we asked students to share whether they believe folks on campus are paying attention to the issue of textbook costs. This was asked in two separate questions: I think my *institution* pays attention to the cost of course materials and works to make them affordable, and I think my *professors* pay attention. We are reporting the responses together because the gaps are interesting.



On this chart, the responses from students who AGREE with these statements are on the right. You can easily see from the size of the red and purple bars that more students think their professors pay attention to cost than think the institution pays attention to cost.

In fact, well over half of our students disagreed or strongly disagreed that the institution pays attention to cost, with a sizeable chunk being neutral about that statement.

They shared a lot more detail in the free response fields.

Let's talk about the idea of "the institution." We believe this includes the bookstore...

"I would have put agree for the previous question about the institution paying attention to cost, but I found one textbook thirty dollars cheaper on Amazon (new) than from the bookstore"



...and we got at least a dozen comments about the bookstore in particular. Here's one:
"I would have put agree for the previous question about the institution paying attention to cost, but I found one textbook thirty dollars cheaper on Amazon (new) than from the bookstore"

“sells loose leaf copies of books but refuse to accept them as returns”

“I and my peers have ordered rentals/purchased used textbooks from the store only to have them cancel the order without our knowledge and automatically charge us for brand new textbooks/rentals.”

“The advertised ‘sale’ cost of a used book in the school’s bookstore is 5 times greater than what I pay to get the book elsewhere”

“With the Bookstore being run through a corporation, there is little they have done to effectively lower costs, but there are many programs and resources here on campus to support students.”

“bookstore also rarely has enough used books”

“sell back rates at the end of the semester are not that good”

“I have struggled with books being out of stock or backordered at the bookstore which has also interfered with my learning.”



Students had a lot of feelings about the bookstore, and we included just a few more comments about them here.

“It's frustrating that semester after semester, students and faculty that actually care share that the costs of textbooks is hurtful to students and nothing changes. I'm taking a requirement course in a field that is not relevant to my degree or post-graduate work and is intended for non-majors, meaning it will basically never be relevant to students. I had to pay over \$100 for it. Why?”



The bookstore wasn't the only institutional topic they commented on, though. Here's another that kind of rises above the level of professors caring: "It's frustrating that semester after semester, students and faculty that actually care share that the costs of textbooks is hurtful to students and nothing changes. I'm taking a requirement course in a field that is not relevant to my degree or post-graduate work and is intended for non-majors, meaning it will basically never be relevant to students. I had to pay over \$100 for it. Why?"



But we don't want you to think that students do nothing but complain in the free response fields! We actually received a lot of positive comments, too, and are thrilled to share them today.

“It definitely depends on the department/major, but the environmental studies department has been great about using open resources that are free for us.”



One student wrote: “It definitely depends on the department/major, but the environmental studies department has been great about using open resources that are free for us.”

“I'm really thankful for professors who work to make cheaper the materials we have to buy ourselves.”



Another said “I'm really thankful for professors who work to make cheaper the materials we have to buy ourselves.”

“textbooks are too expensive and I appreciate the professors that don't make you buy them”



More love for professors: “textbooks are too expensive and I appreciate the professors that don't make you buy them”

“The Mosaic Minds program has been very helpful, but they can't cover everything”

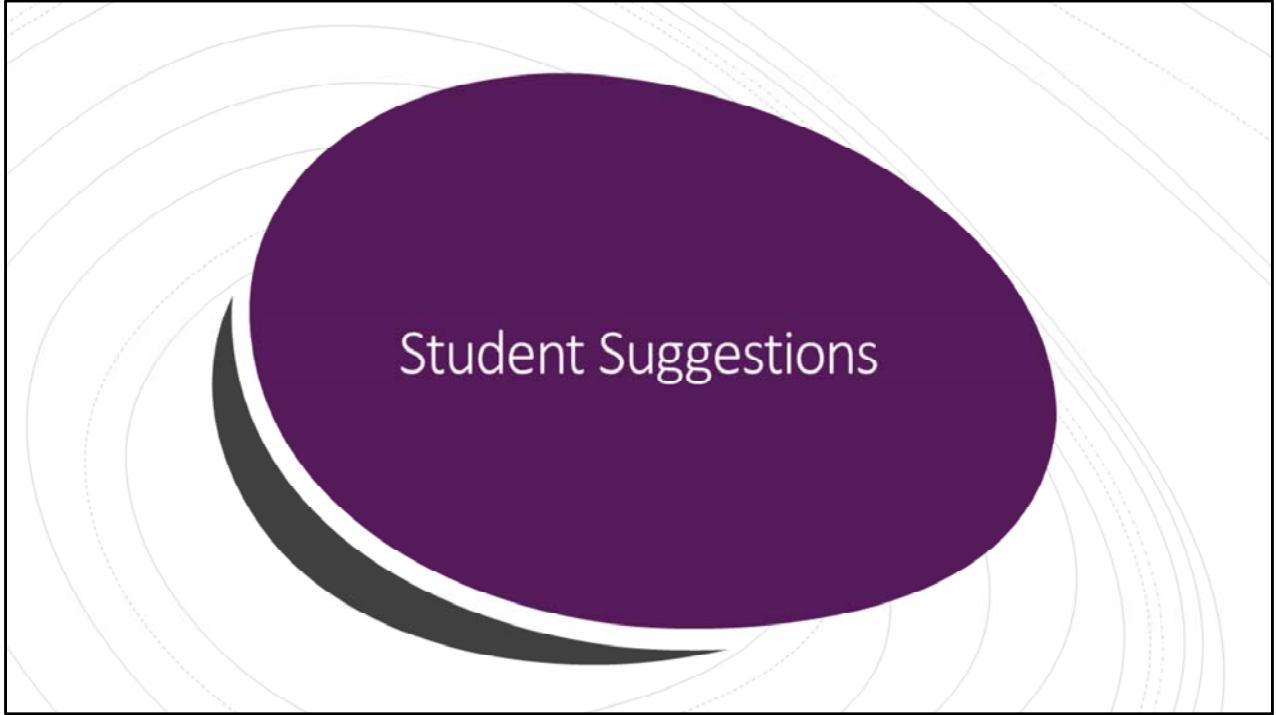


Here's one for our friends at OME: “The Mosaic Minds program has been very helpful, but they can't cover everything”

“The office of multicultural engagement at my school really helps and listen to some of the students stories about textbooks assisting as much as they can.”



And another: “The office of multicultural engagement at my school really helps and listen to some of the students stories about textbooks assisting as much as they can.”



Students also left some very specific suggestions for us.

"I didn't appreciate open-source textbooks until two science classes used them last year. Those textbooks would typically be very expensive. It was a shock to come to one of my classes this semester and see that there are 4 "required" textbooks that are \$50 each minimum. Luckily I was able to get them from a friend, but I seriously considered dropping the class. Professors should really understand what they mean when they put "required" because the student that gave me the books said that they are not. I would have been very upset if I spent \$200 on non-required textbooks"



One wrote: "I didn't appreciate open-source textbooks until two science classes used them last year. Those textbooks would typically be very expensive. It was a shock to come to one of my classes this semester and see that there are 4 "required" textbooks that are \$50 each minimum. Luckily I was able to get them from a friend, but I seriously considered dropping the class. Professors should really understand what they mean when they put "required" because the student that gave me the books said that they are not. I would have been very upset if I spent \$200 on non-required textbooks"

“i think professors should make the effort to send emails to the class before the start of the semester to let the students know when each book will be used so that we aren't spending 100+ dollars at the start of the semester. it would be ideal if we could work, save up, and then have enough money by the time the books are actually needed in class”



And another wrote “i think professors should make the effort to send emails to the class before the start of the semester to let the students know when each book will be used so that we aren't spending 100+ dollars at the start of the semester. it would be ideal if we could work, save up, and then have enough money by the time the books are actually needed in class”

This is just another reminder that students who pay for books with their own money often need to earn that money during the same semester that they need the books.



There are more ways we could discuss the data collected in the survey, but we only have so much time, so we'll move to wrap things up now. We have 3 specific recommendations for campus colleagues.

Recommendations

1

**Transparent
communication around
costs**

The first recommendation is that instructors, and in fact everyone on campus who works with students, should strive to have an open and transparent line of communication with students about the cost of books.

It seems clear that more students are struggling with costs now than they were before the pandemic. Our student population is shifting, with higher percentages of first-generation students and Pell-eligible students each year. We also have a swiftly increasing number of international students here, and our textbook system is radically different than what they are used to.

The fact that buying books is an additional cost on top of the basic college bill, and that book prices are highly variable across courses, is still taking many students by surprise (especially first-year students). This is part of the so-called “hidden curriculum” of college, and it can leave students feeling duped and isolated. We don’t want this!

Specifically, we have room to improve our communications with incoming first-year students during the summer, *especially* incoming first-generation students. No one should be shocked by the textbook situation after moving to campus. This will require coordination among offices and divisions.

Recommendations

2

**Seek to reduce book costs
whenever possible**

Second: instructors and departments should actively attempt to reduce the cost of their course materials. Not every course has to go to zero-cost – that’s unrealistic, and this is a good time to remind you that students think it is reasonable to pay *some* amount for course materials (\$50 was both the mode and median response). But there are lots of high-cost courses that might cost quite a bit less.

One way to get started is to simply ask other instructors how they have achieved zero- or low-cost courses. The good news is that there are lots of colleagues to ask here at Gettysburg. According to our records—which are we know are not official or comprehensive—in Fall 2022 (last semester) 38 professors taught 56 zero-cost sections of 31 courses, with about 1200 enrolled students. In these zero-cost courses, students saved almost \$180,000.

There is no single way to get a course to zero cost. Instructors use a combination of strategies (sometimes in the same course) including adopting openly-licensed materials (like the OpenStax textbooks), library-licensed materials (like multi-user library ebooks or articles from our journal subscriptions), and using our Course Reserves service. Some of these work better in some areas of study than others, but we see zero-cost courses in all 3 College divisions. If you WANT a course to be zero-cost, there is probably a way to get it there.

Recommendations

3

Don't assume someone else is solving this problem

Our final recommendation is more cautionary than action-oriented: please do not assume that someone else or some other office on campus is taking care of the problem of high book costs.

There are some funding sources for students who struggle with book costs, but they are few, limited, and mostly hidden. The ones I know about include the bookstore scholarship fund, Mosaic Minds, and the Staneck Family Endowed Fund for Student Materials. Together these funds paid about \$12,000 in course material costs in this academic year. Only one of those funds is an endowment with guaranteed future income. The only one that is widely known by students is Mosaic Minds, and they turned away 40 students this year because they ran out of money.

Let me explicitly connect some dots you are probably already connecting in your heads: I just shared that last fall, the work of 38 professors saved 1200 students \$180,000. These emergency funds only spent about \$12,000 and helped a handful of students. Textbook affordability is not a problem we're going to fundraise ourselves out of. The answer is not to ask donors for more money that we will give to students to turn over to commercial publishers. Rather, the answer is to double the number of professors who address the problem at the course level.

I often use a health care analogy when talking about solutions to textbook affordability. These emergency funding sources like Mosaic Minds are like first-aid or emergency room care in a health care system – we must have them, but we also know they aren't enough and will never address the root causes of health or disease. The first two recommendations fall closer to the “preventive health care” end of the spectrum. They are longer-term projects, but they are the ones that will make a difference in the long run. If we keep doing business as usual, we will just need more emergency care.

That's my call to action. There is a role that every single person in this room can play I regards to textbook affordability. The role is pretty straightforward if you are an instructor... but there are a lot of people here today who don't teach credit-bearing courses. But you oversee areas that can engage in this work (either in partnership with us or in your own way), or you work directly with students who are affected and may want to organize around this work, or you manage a budget that can contribute somehow toward long-term solutions, or you can advocate to campus decision-makers that we more this work forward in a big way. Maybe it's time to form a campus-level textbook affordability committee to coordinate and advance this work. Maybe something else. I know you have lots of great ideas, and questions, too. Let's hear them!

Questions? Email OER@gettysburg.edu

Slides and speaker notes:

<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/librarypubs/168>

Thank
you!



by Janelle Wertzberger and Mary Elmquist

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)