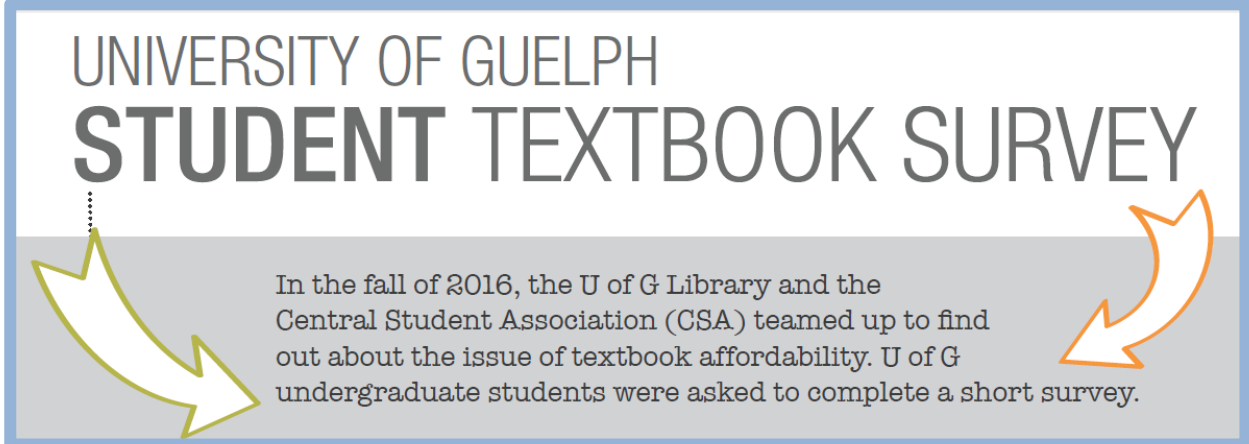


# UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH STUDENT TEXTBOOK SURVEY



In the fall of 2016, the U of G Library and the Central Student Association (CSA) teamed up to find out about the issue of textbook affordability. U of G undergraduate students were asked to complete a short survey.

## #TextbookBroke:

### Findings of a University of Guelph student survey on textbook purchasing behaviours and outcomes

#### Executive Summary

The high cost of commercial textbooks creates financial burdens for many post-secondary students. There have been a number of recent studies exploring the link between high textbook costs and negative outcomes for students. The 2014 publication “Fixing the Broken Textbook Market” by the U.S. Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) reported that in the past decade, “textbook prices have increased by 82%” and that “...textbooks remain one of the largest out of pocket expenses for students and families – meaning that high price tags are yet another threat to affordability and accessibility of education in the United States.”<sup>1</sup> Surveys conducted in 2010, 2012, and 2016 by the Florida Virtual Campus found that “the high cost of textbooks is negatively impacting student access, success and completion.”<sup>2</sup>

Student groups across Canada have initiated #TextbookBroke campaigns to draw attention to the challenges these trends are creating for students. In addition to rising textbook prices, student groups have pointed out that publishing industry practices such as the bundling of content, the use of access codes, and the frequent updating of textbook editions, have virtually eliminated the used textbook market.<sup>3</sup> Students are left with few options when it comes to obtaining affordable course materials.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S.PIRG, “Fixing the Broken Textbook Market: how students respond to high textbook costs and demand alternatives”, 2014,

<http://uspirg.org/sites/pirg/files/reports/NATIONAL%20Fixing%20Broken%20Textbooks%20Report1.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Florida Virtual Campus, Office of Distance Learning & Student Services, “2016 Student Textbook and Course Materials Survey”, 2016, <https://florida.theorange grove.org/og/file/3a65c507-2510-42d7-814c-ffdefd394b6c/1/2016%20Student%20Textbook%20Survey.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Ethan Senack, Robert Donoghue, Kasya O’Connor Grant, and Kaitlin Steen, “Access Denied: The New Face of the Textbook Monopoly”, 2016, <https://studentpirgs.org/sites/student/files/reports/Access%20Denied%20-%20Final%20Report.pdf>.

In order to find out whether these same issues were affecting University of Guelph students, the Library partnered with the University's Central Student Association (CSA) in the fall of 2016 to survey undergraduate students about their textbook purchasing behaviours. The goals of the UG Student Textbook survey (referred to as the #TextbookBroke survey) were to determine whether textbook and course material affordability was an issue on the Guelph campus, and if so, how UG students were affected by it. The survey was sent out just after students had completed their textbook-purchasing decision-making for the semester. The University of Guelph has an undergraduate population of approximately 23,000 and more than 4,000 of these students responded to the survey. Some 3,200 responses also included written comments.

The survey questions were intended to obtain information from students on the following issues:

- how much they spent on textbooks in the current semester
- whether they had ever opted not to purchase a textbook for a course
- if they did not purchase a textbook, what approaches they used to compensate for not having the textbook
- if they did not purchase a textbook, how concerned they were about not having the textbook
- if they saw a downside to not having a textbook, and if so, what the downside(s) were

The survey results were analysed by the University's Task Force on Accessible Course Content and Open Educational Resources (hereinafter referred to as the Task Force), which was formed in early 2017 and is jointly sponsored by the University Librarian and the Provost and Vice-President, Academic.

The survey revealed that many students are making the decision not to buy required textbooks. Instead, students reported that they are relying on other (often less satisfactory) methods of obtaining access to course materials, or are simply doing without. Collectively, they indicated that these decisions are having a wide range of impacts on their university experience.

### **Student spending on textbooks**

Students were asked to indicate the total amount spent by selecting from a range of dollar amounts, with the lowest being zero and the highest being "More than \$1,500." Almost 30% of students who responded indicated they had spend more than \$500 on their textbooks for the semester, while less than 1% reported spending \$1,000 or more. The category of spending that was reported the most was the \$250-\$500 range. Generally speaking, the spending reported by students was lower than the Task Force had anticipated. However, this finding made sense when considered alongside the responses to other survey questions, which revealed that students are regularly opting not to buy textbooks and being selective about the textbooks they do purchase.

### **Textbook purchasing decisions**

The second question on the survey asked students to report whether they had ever opted not to purchase a textbook. There was no timeline attached to this question, as the question was intended to determine whether students had ever made this choice, not whether they had done so recently. Fifty-seven per cent of students who responded indicated that they had decided to forgo buying a required textbook at some point in their post-secondary career. While the survey did not assess how often students were opting not to purchased textbooks, some of the comments received in the last question of the survey seemed to suggest that this was routine behaviour for many students.

The survey also revealed a relationship between the amount students spent that semester on textbooks, and whether or not they always purchased required textbooks. The more or less students reported spending on textbooks, the more likely they were to have not purchased a textbook on at least one occasion. These results perhaps indicate that students whose textbook costs are at the high end of the scale, may have greater incentive not to purchase at least some of them, while those who reported spending less perhaps did so because they frequently opt not to purchase textbooks.

### **Alternatives to purchasing the required textbook**

Students who answered “Yes” when asked if they had ever chosen not to purchase a textbook, were then asked to explain how they managed without one. More than 70% of the respondents indicated that they had tried to find an alternate means of accessing the required material – either by using a library copy, using a friend’s copy, or downloading a copy from the Internet. Only 28 % of respondents indicated that they opted just not to use the textbook at all. In the comments section, students also noted other ways that they addressed the problem: some mentioned using an older edition even though the pagination was different, while some suggested that they used a combination of approaches. Many of the comments provided in the final question of the survey demonstrated the resourcefulness of students when trying to obtain textbook content via alternate means. However, the comments also revealed that many of the alternative options proved to be less than satisfactory. In other words, students would have preferred to have a copy of the required textbook if they could have; their decision to find an alternative to a purchased copy was generally not driven by preference.

### **Level of concern about not having the textbook**

The survey also asked students how concerned they were about not having the required textbook. Eighty-seven per cent of the respondents indicated they were either “very concerned” or “somewhat concerned.” Even those students who had found alternate means of accessing the textbook content reported moderate to high levels of concern with having decided not to purchase the required text. This suggests that the alternatives were not generally acceptable substitutes for having one’s own purchased copy.

The degree to which respondents expressed concern varied somewhat based on the method they had chosen to compensate for not having the textbook. Students who used the library’s copy, or borrowed from a friend, reported higher levels of concern than those who downloaded a copy from the internet. Interestingly, the group of students who did not use a textbook at all were less likely to report that they were “very concerned” and more likely to report that they were “not at all concerned” than those students who used the library’s copy or borrowed from a friend.

### **Downsides of not purchasing the required textbook**

All of the respondents were asked whether they felt there was a downside to not purchasing a textbook. Only 14% of respondents did not see a downside.

That such a significant number of students reported negative consequences when textbooks are not purchased suggests that there is a strong belief among students that the required textbook is an essential component of their courses. When this finding is considered alongside the fact that nearly 60% of students reported that they have opted not to purchase textbooks at some point, the conclusions are troubling and raise further questions. If students feel that having a textbook is critical, and if they do not purchase a

textbook, what impact might this be having on their academic success, their stress level, their physical and emotional well being, or their social relationships? Are there also implications for students who reported that they always purchase textbooks, such as financial pressures, concerns about the value of the textbook, or anxiety about whether they should purchase a textbook or not?

Students who reported downsides to not purchasing a textbook provided more than 3,200 comments outlining the negative consequences they experienced. There were common themes such as unsatisfactory learning outcomes, falling behind in class, and getting lower grades, but some comments highlighted less obvious consequences. Respondents noted that the textbook crisis contributed to copyright infringement and piracy, had negative impacts for students with disabilities, and also had significant impacts on student well-being and mental health.

Even those students who always purchase textbooks in spite of the cost reported concerns – either because of financial hardship directly related to the cost of the textbooks or because of frustration and anxiety due to indirect causes. For example, students expressed anger when they had made a difficult choice to purchase a textbook which was subsequently only minimally used by the instructor or when they purchased an e-textbook which they were prevented from retaining once the course was over. Also, it seems that some students who opt to purchase textbooks are sharing those texts with other students in the class in order to save on costs, a practise with its own set of challenges.

## Conclusions

The responses to the survey questions, as well as the many comments that the survey respondents provided, yielded a wealth of information about the behaviours and attitudes of University of Guelph students with respect to required textbooks. The Task Force was surprised to learn the extent to which students were opting not to buy textbooks. Even more concerning, however, was the fact that students overwhelmingly reported negative outcomes resulting from their decision not to purchase a required textbook. The survey reveals a potentially serious disconnect between the expectations of instructors (and by extension, the university) and the lived experiences of students. Faced with tight budgets, students reported that they are regularly making decisions to do without textbooks or attempting to get by with often unsatisfactory alternatives, in order to balance their need to do well in a course with their need for essentials such as food and housing. In doing so, they report significant negative impacts in such areas as academic success, learning outcomes, social relationships and mental health, as well as on their university experience generally.

## Recommendations and Next Steps

The data from this survey will lay the groundwork for future activities of the Task Force. More specifically, as a result of the information gleaned from the survey, the Task Force will initiate the following in order to address some of the issues students identified:

- Ensure that as many textbooks as possible are made available to students via the Library's Course Reserve service. A pilot project was launched in the Fall 2017 semester.
- Implement changes to Library Course Reserve policies for textbook borrowing in order to enable more effective and equitable access for students who rely on library copies.
- Develop a student feedback mechanism to gather data on the usefulness of Course Reserve services with respect to providing access to textbooks.

- Collect and review data from the University Bookstore in order to better understand the context of commercial textbooks and other course materials at the University.
- Update and re-run the Student Textbook (#textbookbroke) Survey annually in order to gather comparative data that will help to evaluate the effectiveness of ACC/OER initiatives.

Also, recognizing that more systemic changes will be necessary at the institutional level in order to address the issue of course material affordability over the long term, the Task Force makes the following recommendations:

- That a University of Guelph program be implemented with the goal of raising awareness and promoting the use of Open Educational Resources (OER) with faculty and other instructors, as a mechanism for decreasing the dependence on commercial textbooks while improving access to resources and learning outcomes for students.
- That efforts be made to create a campus environment in which the creation/adoption of OER by instructors is encouraged and rewarded.
- That a faculty incentive program be established to provide compensation (monetary or otherwise) to instructors who choose to adapt or create an open educational resource for a course.
- That the University engage with student leaders in a conversation about the survey results and agree upon approaches for moving forward with addressing the issues identified.

October 18, 2017

Accessible Course Content and Open Educational Resources Task Force:

Heather Martin, Copyright Officer and Manager, E-Learning and Reserve Services, Library

Ali Versluis, Research and Scholarship Librarian, Library

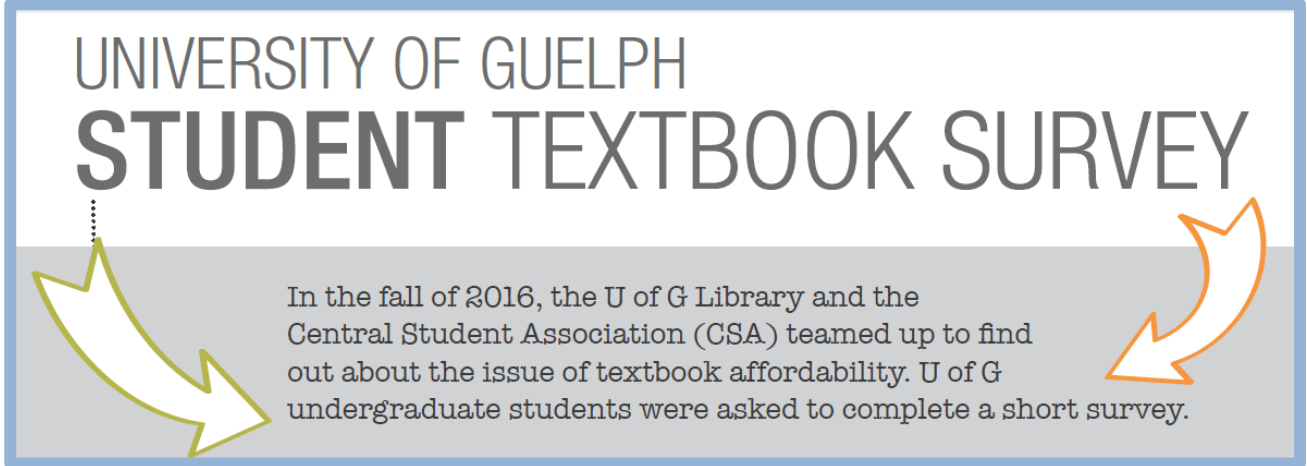
Melanie Cassidy, Learning and Curriculum Support Librarian, Library

Ron Ward, Senior Research Officer, Library

Natalie Green, Manager, Distance Education, Open Learning and Educational Support

Becca Cheskes, VP Academic, Central Student Association

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## #TextbookBroke: Findings of a University of Guelph student survey on textbook purchasing behaviours and outcomes

### Introduction

A number of recent studies have explored the effect of rising textbook costs on university and college students. The impacts identified in these studies range from financial hardship to academic challenges to social and mental health consequences. While the majority of studies have been US-based, a University of Guelph survey conducted in the Fall of 2016 suggests that post-secondary students in Canada may be experiencing similar impacts.

The 2014 publication “Fixing the Broken Textbook Market” by the U.S. Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) reported that in the past decade, “textbook prices have increased by 82%” and that “...textbooks remain one of the largest out of pocket expenses for students and families – meaning that high price tags are yet another threat to affordability and accessibility of education in the United States.”<sup>4</sup> Surveys conducted in 2010, 2012, and 2016 by the Florida Virtual Campus found that “the high cost of textbooks is negatively impacting student access, success and completion.”<sup>5</sup>

### Student Advocacy

Increasing dissatisfaction with traditional textbook offerings has resulted in calls by student organizations, both in the US, and more recently in Canada, for faculty to adopt open textbooks. Primarily, this student advocacy has highlighted the escalating cost of traditional textbooks, but it has also called attention to

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. PIRG, “Fixing the Broken Textbook Market: how students respond to high textbook costs and demand alternatives”, 2014,

<http://uspig.org/sites/pirg/files/reports/NATIONAL%20Fixing%20Broken%20Textbooks%20Report1.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Florida Virtual Campus, Office of Distance Learning & Student Services, “2016 Student Textbook and Course Materials Survey”, 2016, <https://florida.theorange.org/og/file/3a65c507-2510-42d7-814c-ffdefd394b6c/1/2016%20Student%20Textbook%20Survey.pdf>

related issues in the textbook publishing industry, such as the bundling of content, the use of access codes to control access to ancillary materials, and the elimination of the used textbook market by frequently updating editions.<sup>6</sup>

In Canada, an increasing number of student groups have been engaging in #TextbookBroke campaigns to draw attention to the impact of high-priced textbooks, and to promote the value of open textbooks as an alternative. Such a campaign was run in the Fall of 2016 at the University of Victoria, where the student association (UVSS) organized a contest in which students had their photos taken with a sign indicating how much they spent on textbooks that semester. Similar programs were run by student groups at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University. Among their conclusions were that the average amount spent per student on textbooks each semester was \$500, and that “nearly all students have purchased a textbook that they barely used, and the majority have used alternative means to meet their textbook needs.”<sup>7</sup>

## University of Guelph Context

The University of Guelph is a mid-sized institution with about 23,000 students, about 2,400 of whom are graduate students. It is considered a comprehensive institution, with a range of undergraduate and graduate programming. As an institution that has its founding roots in agriculture and veterinary medicine, UG is science focused. The unique complement of programs, coupled with various government partnerships, have resulted in a research intensive identity. With the majority of students living on campus or within the general Guelph area, the university is residential in its composition.

There has been a long history of student activism at Guelph. However, until recently, the level of interest and engagement with textbook affordability issues was low. Some informal concerns were raised with University Administration by the Central Student Association (CSA) in 2010. In 2011, the library received questions from the CSA about whether more instructors could place copies of required texts at the Reserve Desk. The CSA also launched a short virtual campaign in 2013, encouraging faculty to consider using Open Educational Resources (OER) as an alternative to expensive textbooks. However, no formal initiative addressing the issue of affordable and accessible course materials was undertaken until fall 2016.

## University of Guelph Survey

As mentioned, student interest in textbook and course material affordability was already present. Having run on a platform of making course materials more affordable, the CSA’s Academic and University Affairs Commissioner Meghan Wing approached library administration in the summer of 2016 and inquired about the possibility of collaborating on some sort of initiative. Associate Chief Librarian Barbara McDonald then put Meghan in touch with Research and Scholarship Librarian Ali Versluis and Manager, E-Learning and Course Reserves Heather Martin. Semi-regular meetings with these three individuals commenced in mid-summer and unfolded into the fall, providing valuable context and perspective about roles, ideas, and goals

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<sup>6</sup> Ethan Senack, Robert Donoghue, Kasya O’Connor Grant, and Kaitlin Steen, “Access Denied: The New Face of the Textbook Monopoly”, 2016, <https://studentpirgs.org/sites/student/files/reports/Access%20Denied%20-%20Final%20Report.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> University of Victoria Student Society. *TextbookBroke*, <https://uvss.ca/campaigns/textbookbroke/>

for the partnership. In order to truly understand the climate on campus, the group had to gauge student attitudes and behaviours. Principally, the questions were: Was textbook and course material affordability an issue on the UG campus? If it was, how were students navigating rising costs?

It was decided that a survey would be the best method to begin to explore these questions. Recognizing that students were less likely to answer a lengthy survey, the group decided against collecting demographic and program-specific information in favour of purely focusing on attitudes and behaviours. The survey consisted of five questions (four multiple choice and one text-based format), with none of the questions being mandatory. The survey had a short preamble to let students know the purpose of the survey and the rationale behind creating a separate survey for an incentive draw.

The group generated questions collaboratively, with Ali creating the survey using Qualtrics software based on these discussions. Meghan distributed the survey through a centralized CSA listserv, telling students that they could complete it in 30 seconds or less. The survey link was distributed to all undergraduate students as members of this listserv. Using the CSA communications channel was preferable to any library-specific communication channels. Due to the hectic nature of the fall semester and the quick turnaround time for

the survey, the group did not engage with any other promotion or communication methods. There was a small incentive: those who completed it could submit their email into a draw for a \$25 hospitality card. To minimize the risk of being able to identify survey responses to a specific email address, students who completed the survey were prompted to another link, which when opened, allowed them to provide their institutional email address to be considered for the draw.

The survey was delivered in October, after the majority of students had done their



4,240  
STUDENT RESPONSES

materials purchasing for the semester. There were 4,240 responses, with 3,200 free-text responses. This represented a 21% response rate. The survey was closed at the end of November 2016, at which point it was decided that the recently formed task force would be responsible for analysis. Senior Research Officer Ron Ward took the lead in analyzing the numerical data, providing a quick snapshot. All of the task force members participated in coding the contents of the free-text responses, based on major themes that they had identified<sup>8</sup>. The responses were distributed among the task force members, then categorized according to the primary issue or theme identified in each response, with multiple categories being assigned to a response if necessary. After an initial round of coding all comments, the team met again to resolve any coding discrepancies and to further refine the criteria for the theme categories. The final step was to assess

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<sup>8</sup> At this point, the Task Force consisted of Manager of E-Learning and Course Reserves Heather Martin (Chair), Research and Scholarship Librarian Ali Versluis, Learning and Curriculum Support Librarian Melanie Cassidy, Senior Research Officer Ron Ward, Manager of Distance Education for OpenEd Natalie Green, and Central Student Association Academic and University Affairs Commissioner Rebecca Cheskes.



the relative frequencies of the issues raised in the free-text responses. Results were grouped by whether or not an individual had or had not always bought course textbooks, then examined among those lines.

The Task Force did not do any significance testing in this survey analysis process because there had been no preplanned treatment or specific research question posed. The purpose of the survey was primarily opinion probing to help understand the extent and possible attributions surrounding this issue.

## Survey Questions

The survey consisted of five questions: four were multiple choice and one was text-based. Students who answered “Yes” to Question 2 were asked to respond to two additional questions. Both Question 2b and Question 3 included a free text component for students to provide a further explanation of their answer selection if they desired. None of the questions were mandatory. This was essentially so that students who did not feel comfortable providing an answer did not have to.

The intent of the survey questions was to obtain information from students on the following specific issues:

- how much they spent on textbooks in the current semester
- whether they had ever opted not to purchase a textbook for a course
- if they did not purchase a textbook, what approaches they used to compensate for not having the textbook
- if they did not purchase a textbook, how concerned they were about not having the textbook
- if they saw a downside to not having a textbook, and if so, what the downside(s) were

Although the word “textbook” was in the survey title and preamble, it was our intention to capture all the associated materials that this included: course packs, novels, workbooks, or other materials. We were primarily interested in investigating ideas and attitudes for the spectrum of required materials.

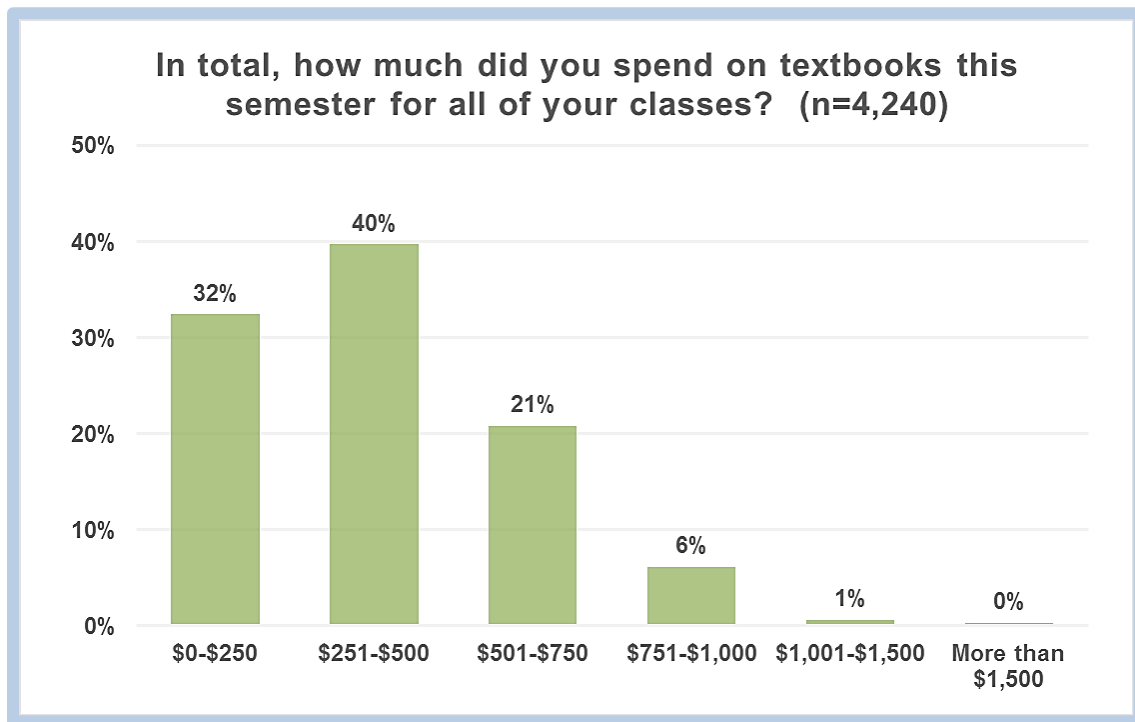
See Appendix A for the complete contents of the survey, including the full text of all the questions and the preamble.

## Survey Responses

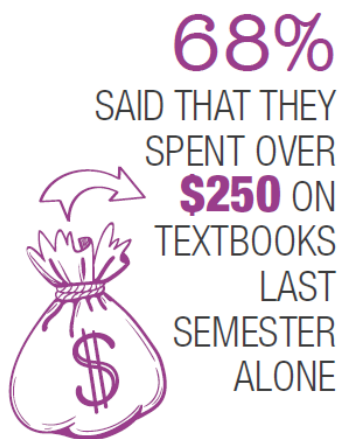
### Student spending on textbooks

The first question on the survey asked students to report the total dollar amount that each of them had spent that semester on purchasing textbooks for all of their classes. Students were asked to indicate the total amount spent by selecting from a range of dollar amounts, with the lowest being zero and the highest being “More than \$1,500.”

In total, 4,240 responses to this question were completed. The chart below summarizes the results and shows that there was substantial variation in the amounts students spent on their textbooks.



Almost 30% of the students who responded reported spending more than \$500 on their textbooks for the semester. However, less than 1% of respondents reported spending \$1,000 or more on textbooks. The most frequently chosen category of spending was the \$250-\$500 range, followed by the \$0-\$250 range. Seventy-two percent of students reported spending less than \$500 in total on their textbooks, and 92% of all respondents spent less than \$750.



In general, the amounts students reported spending on textbooks during the fall 2016 semester was less than we had anticipated. However, there were a number of unknown factors that may have impacted these results. As we did not collect any demographic data, it was impossible to know how many respondents may have been part time students taking only one or two courses, resulting in lower total textbook costs. We also could not tell whether all of the courses students were taking actually required the purchase of a textbook. Neither could we tell if students had opted to purchase textbooks for only one or two of their courses, and find alternate solutions for the remaining courses. However, based on the responses to the other questions on the survey, as well as the extensive comments that

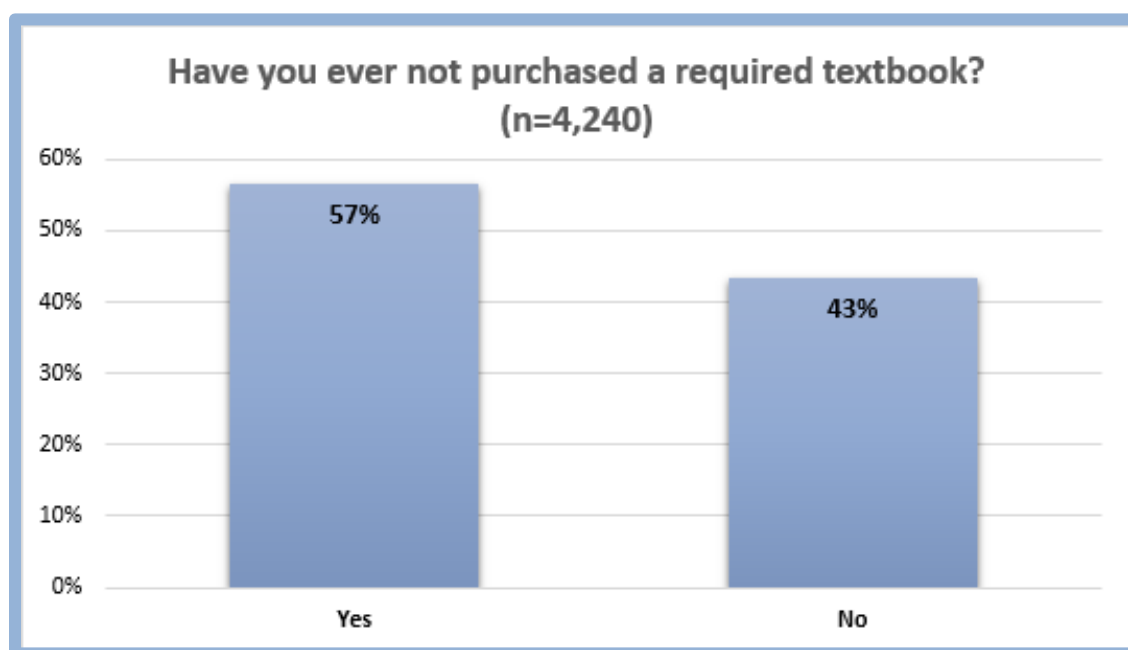
students provided, it seems highly likely that the reported totals were impacted by students opting not to purchase at least some of the required textbooks for their courses.

The addition of a survey question to find how many of their courses students chose to purchase textbooks for, would have provided some useful context. Another option would be to ask students the total cost of purchasing all textbooks for all the courses they were enrolled in versus what they actually spent.

## Textbook purchasing decisions

The second question was in a multiple choice format, asking students to report whether they had ever opted not to purchase a textbook. Respondents could select either yes or no. There was no timeline attached to this question, as we were interested in whether students had ever made this choice, not just whether they had done so recently.

In total, 4,240 responses to this question were received. The chart below summarizes the results, showing that the majority of students indicated that they had not purchased a textbook at some point.

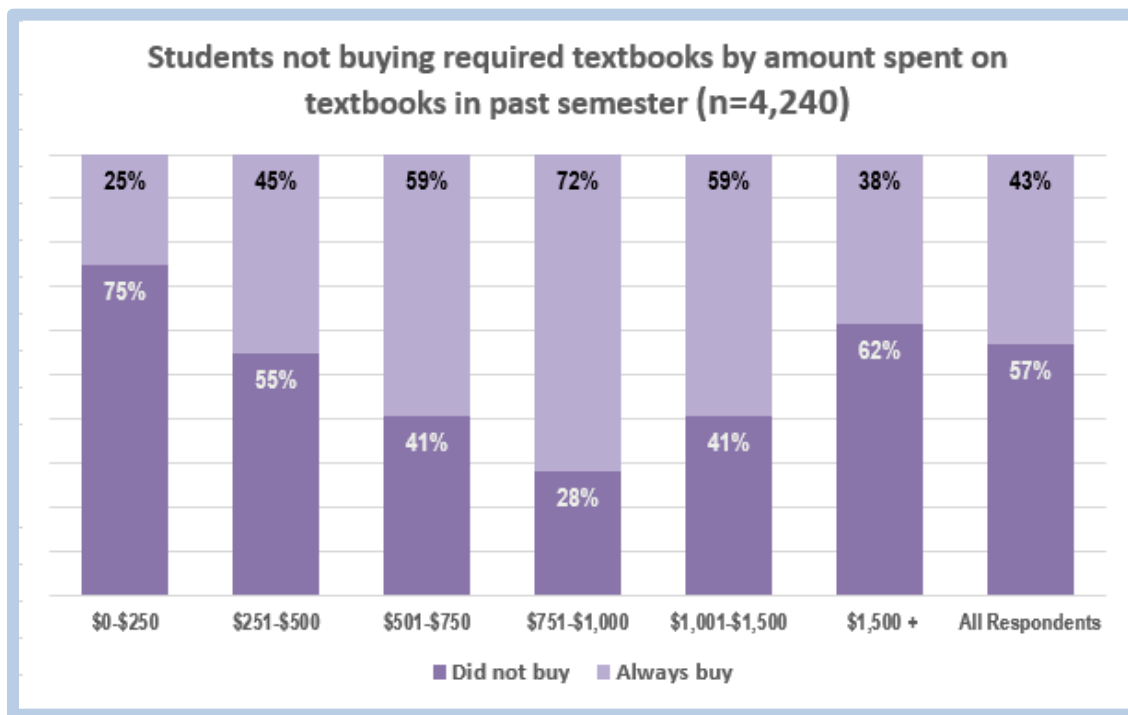


Over 56% of students reported that yes, at some point they had opted to forgo buying a required textbook. This number was lower than the task force had anticipated, given that the question was not tied to a particular semester. This may be partially explained by the semantic construction of the question (“have you ever not”). This language, when coupled with the answer no, results in a double negative, which may have caused some confusion with respondents. The percentage of students who reported that no, they had never decided to forgo purchasing a required textbook was slightly over 43%. This number could also have potentially been skewed by first year students, who having no context for the post-secondary experience, tend to be more likely to purchase.

This question also did not assess the extent to which the group who answered “Yes” were opting not to purchase textbooks. There was no differentiation made between those who routinely forgo purchasing textbooks and those who had only done so on one occasion. However, some of the comments received in the last question of the survey seemed to indicate that many of the respondents routinely made the decision not to purchase a textbook.

We also discovered a relationship between the amount students spent that semester on textbooks, and

whether or not they always purchased required textbooks. The graph below shows that the more or less students reported spending on textbooks, the more likely they were to have not purchased a textbook on at least one occasion.

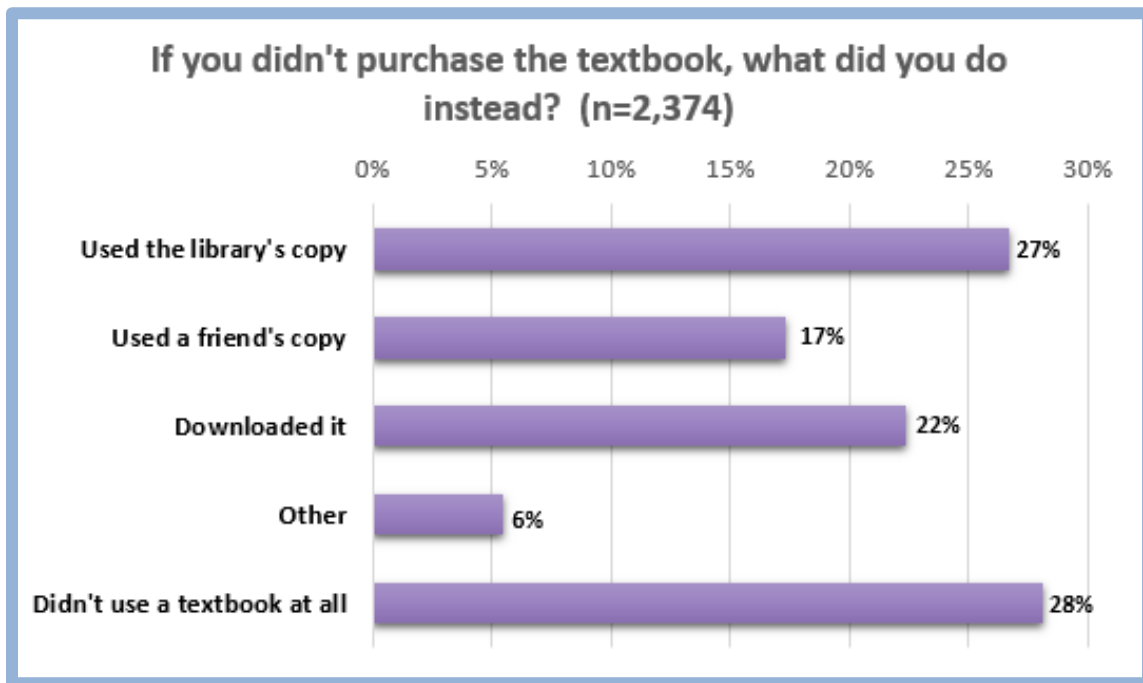


These results perhaps indicate that students whose textbook costs are at the high end of the scale may have greater incentive not to purchase at least some of them, while those who reported spending less perhaps did so because they frequently opt not to purchase textbooks.

### Alternatives to purchasing the required textbook

This question was provided through skip logic, meaning it would only be displayed if someone selected yes to the previous question. The purpose was to find out what alternatives were used by the students who did not purchase the textbook. This question was answered by 2,374 respondents.

Students were asked to select an answer from one of five options: using the library's copy, using a friend's copy, downloading a copy, not using a textbook at all, or "other." For those students who selected the "other" category, a free text field was provided so that students could specify their alternative solution. The majority of students who answered this question reported that they actually did not use a textbook at all. The next largest category was the students who reported using the library's copy, followed by those who downloaded a copy. Using a friend's copy was the least popular of the specific choices provided, with the exception of the "other" category.



For the 5.5% of students who selected “other,” most included an explanation in the free text field provided. These other options for accessing the textbook included torrenting, visiting the public library, Googling information, buying a different edition, relying on group members, or (in the case of a few enterprising students) purchasing a copy from Amazon, making notes, and then returning for a refund. The most common explanation for “other” was that they actually used a combination of the options listed.

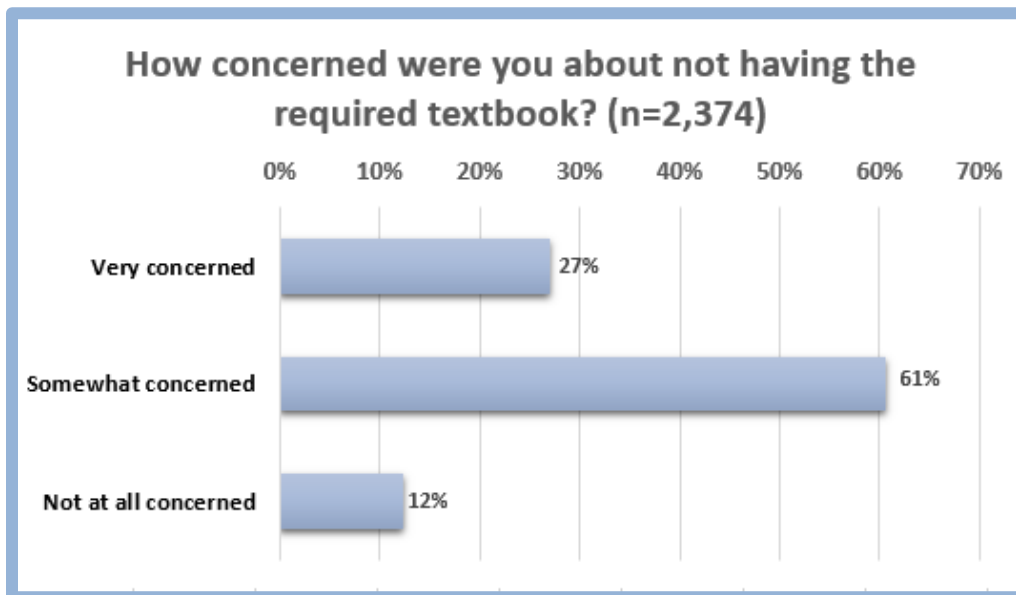
**57%**  
 HAVE OPTED  
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 TEXTBOOK



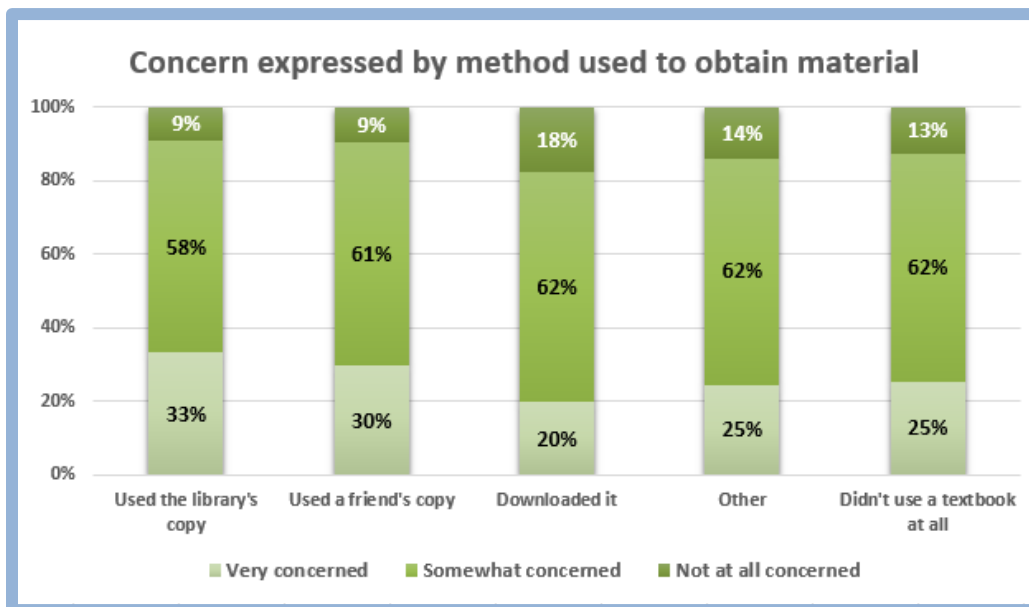
### Level of concern about not having the textbook

This question was also provided through skip logic. It would only be seen by those respondents who had indicated that they had not purchased a textbook in the past. Its purpose was to gauge the level of concern those students had felt about not purchasing a textbook. This question was answered by 2,374 students.

There were three options for this question: very concerned, somewhat concerned, and not at all concerned. The majority of students (over 60%) were somewhat concerned about not having the textbook, while 27% of students were very concerned about not having the textbook. In total, 88% of the students who responded to this question reported some level of concern over not having the textbook.



Levels of concern chosen by the respondents varied somewhat based on the method they had chosen to compensate for not having the textbook. For example, students who used the library’s copy, or used a friend’s copy, reported the highest levels of concern overall, while students who downloaded a copy were the most likely to report that they were “not at all concerned.” This may be explained by the fact that students who downloaded a copy actually had the textbook available, while those who borrowed copies likely did not.



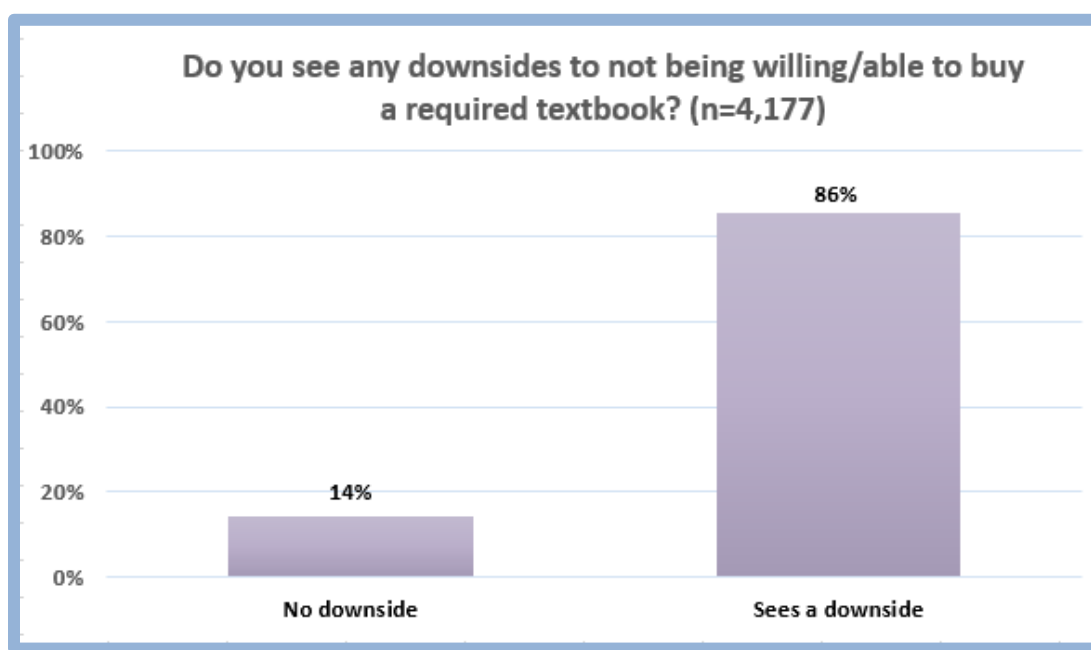
Interestingly, the group of students who did not use a textbook at all were less likely to report that they were “very concerned” and more likely to report that they were “not at all concerned” than those students who used the library’s copy or borrowed from a friend. It is possible that students who did not use a textbook at all had either discovered that they actually did not need the textbook, or, that they avoided

some of the logistical difficulties experienced by students who tried to use the library's or a friend's copy.

### Downsides of not purchasing the required textbook

All of the survey respondents were asked to indicate "Yes" or "No" to the question of whether they saw any downsides to not purchasing a required textbook. Those students who answered "Yes" were asked to provide an explanation. This question was answered by 4,177 students, with 3,221 of those students providing additional comments.

An overwhelming majority of students responded in the affirmative to this question, with only 14.5 % of respondents indicating they did not see any downsides. Of the 85.5 % of respondents who did see a downside, more than 90% of them also provided written comments to explain why.



That such a significant number of students reported negative consequences when textbooks are not purchased suggests that there is a strong belief among students that the textbook is an essential component of most courses. When this finding is considered alongside the fact that 60% of students reported that they have opted not to purchase textbooks at some point, the conclusions are troubling and raise further questions. If students feel that having a textbook is critical, and if they do not purchase a textbook, what impact might this be having on their academic success, their stress level, their physical and emotional well being, or their social relationships? Are there also implications for students who reported that they always purchase textbooks, such as financial pressures, concerns about the value of the textbook, or anxiety about whether they should purchase a textbook or not?

The majority of students who completed the survey provided additional comments in the "Please explain" section of this question, helping to provide some insight into some of the questions raised.

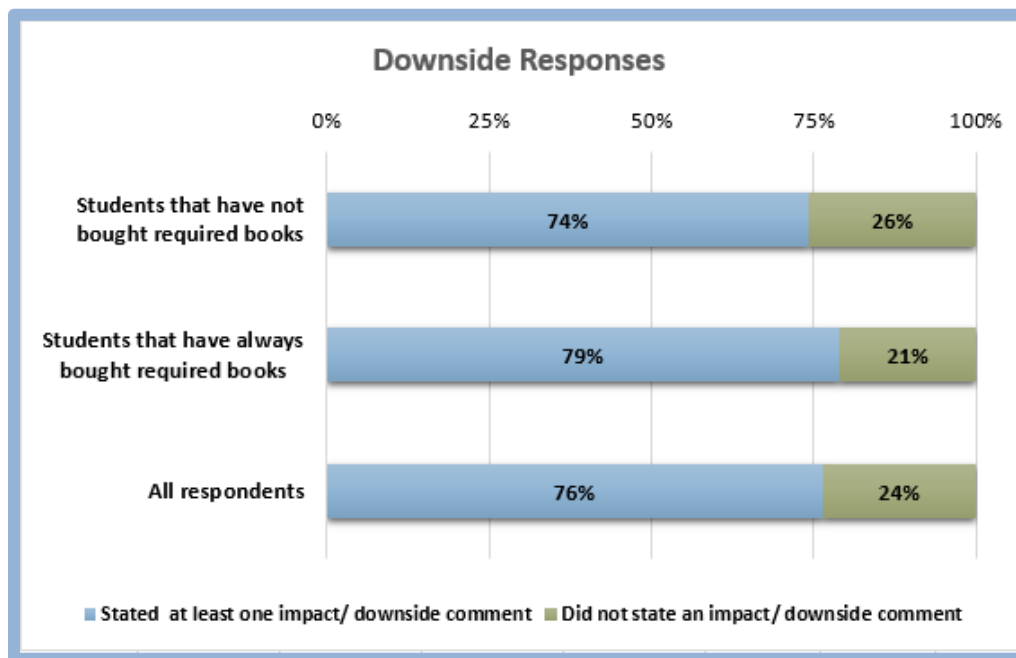
## In their own words: students comment about the downsides of not purchasing textbooks

Seventy-six percent of the students who responded to the last question of the survey supplied additional comments to further explain why they felt there was a downside to not purchasing a textbook. Collectively, these 3,221 comments reveal much about students' perceptions of textbooks and their relationship with them. Moreover, the responses also provide insight into students' behaviours, motivations, perceptions and beliefs, as well as their anxieties and frustrations. Overall, the comments are remarkably consistent with each other with respect to the issues of importance that they address.

For a complete list of the final set of categories and subcategories used to analyze the comments, see Appendix B.

### *Comments: students who did not purchase vs. those who always purchase textbooks*

When asked to elaborate on why they felt there was a downside to not purchasing a textbook, comments were received from both those students who indicated they always purchase textbooks and those who indicated they do not. Interestingly, respondents in the former category were slightly more likely to provide comments than those in the latter category. Seventy-nine per cent of respondents who always purchased textbooks provided comments, compared to 74% of those who indicated they did not always purchase required textbooks.



It is difficult to determine whether the difference in response rate by these two groups of students is important. We speculate that the students who indicated they had opted not to purchase a required textbook at least once were required to answer two additional questions on the survey, thus it may simply be that they felt less inclined to comment on the last question as they had already spent more time than

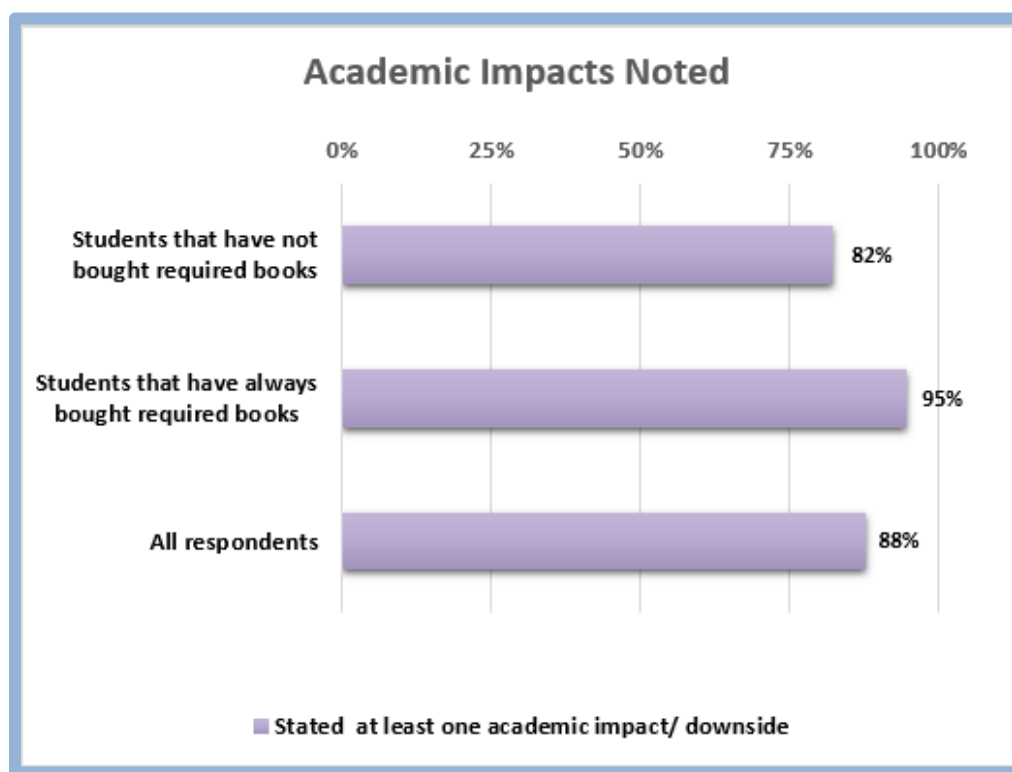


they intended to on completing the survey. Similarly, it is also possible that students who always purchased textbooks felt that they needed to justify their reasons for doing so.

When reviewing the content of the comments provided, it became evident that there were also some differences in the two groups of respondents when it came to identifying the nature of the downsides they reported. More detail about the content of the comments is included in the sections below, grouped according to the primary categories or themes that the task force identified.

### **Impact on Academic Success**

The most commonly reported downsides for the survey respondents related to their academic success, with 88% of the students who provided comments indicating that not purchasing a textbook would or may have affected their ability to do well in the course. Interestingly, when split according to whether or not they always purchased textbooks, the students who always bought were more likely to report academic issues as being a downside of not purchasing, with 95% identifying it as an issue in their comments. It would seem that fear of potential academic consequences may be one factor influencing students who decide to always buy textbooks. Students who had opted not to buy a required text at least once also were in strong agreement that doing so would impact them academically, but this was to a lesser extent (82%) than their peers who always purchased texts.

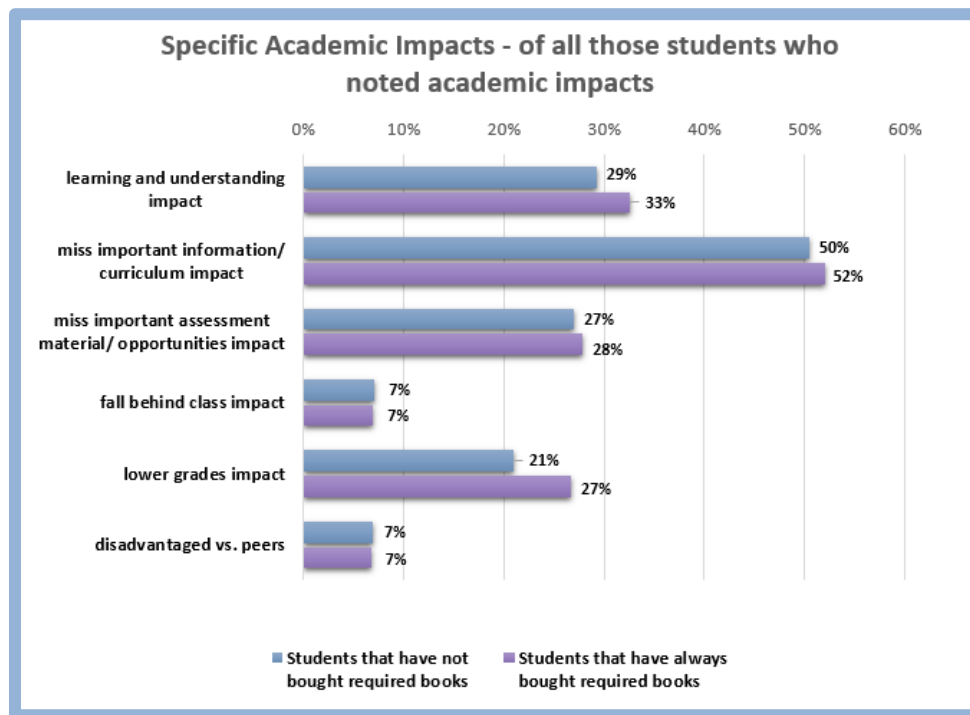


In general, students' comments about the academic impact of not having a textbook fell into six subcategories:

- reduced learning and understanding of the course content
- lack of access to important information related to the course curriculum
- lack of access to assessment materials or materials that would be required for tests and exams

- falling behind in class
- receiving lower grades
- being disadvantaged in comparison to their classmates

The chart below illustrates the extent to which each of these impacts was cited by the respondents. Note that the percentages do not add up to 100%, as students often reported more than one of these impacts in their comments.



### Academic impact: missing important information related to course curriculum

The most often mentioned academic impact of not having a textbook was the lack of access to content critical to the course curriculum. Of all the students who noted academic downsides to not purchasing a textbook, 50% of students who didn't purchase a textbook had noted this, compared to 52% of students who always purchased textbooks.

Students who had opted not to buy textbooks indicated that they felt they were missing out on important information that in some cases could not be found anywhere else. "Always felt like I didn't have access to all the course information," noted one student, "and overall it made me feel unprepared." Another student reported, "[you] can miss out on key content and information, tips or homework examples."

"I won't be able to participate in class as much," remarked another of the survey respondents, "therefore I won't receive the full experience of any lectures requiring the textbook."

Students who said they always purchase the required text also stressed the importance of textbook content. "Homework is based on it, assignments may be based on something in the textbook, [you] may be required to learn concepts in the textbook," noted one student. Another student summed up their thoughts on not

having a textbook as follows:

*“As a student you don't have access to one of the main course materials you need to succeed. It makes studying more difficult and if the prof uses the textbook to frame the course it becomes harder to follow. I've been in multiple courses in which the textbook readings were the basis of the lectures and you needed to have the information in order to fully understand the deeper examination done in class.”*

Some students also mentioned that having to miss a class was problematic if you did not have a textbook, as it was not possible to catch up on the content you had missed. Several also commented on how the textbook provided clarification on concepts they had difficulty learning from lectures alone. Another common downside that students reported was the inability to follow along in class when the instructor referred to specific pages in the textbook.

Many of the comments suggested that instructors rely heavily on textbook content when teaching. One student simply stated, “Prof's expect you to have it.”

### **Academic impact: reduced learning and understanding**

Students also expressed concern about the degree to which they were unable to learn and understand the course material when they did not purchase a textbook. This was the second most frequently cited downside for those students who reported academic impacts, for both students who purchased textbooks (33%) as well as those who did not (29%). Students who commented in this category were often focused on the impact on their own expectations for learning, rather than on grades or other markers of academic success.

“I was not able to learn in depth about the topics that were not covered in class,” commented one respondent. Another indicated that not having the textbook resulted in “less understanding of the lecture material.”

“The knowledge that is meant to be conveyed in the course will not fully be part of my learning experience,” lamented a student who had opted not to purchase a textbook. One student also grudgingly noted that having a textbook would “maybe support better understanding, but [I] cannot afford to pay hundreds of dollars unless is it required.”

Students who always purchased textbooks also felt strongly about textbooks being vital to learning. “Much of learning in university is self taught and the textbooks typically do a great job of walking through concepts,” commented one. “Not all material is covered in detail during lectures so being able to have a textbook for that class allows you to expand your basic knowledge of something and truly understand what you are here to learn about,” wrote another student. “Textbooks are expensive, but they are almost mandatory in order to get the full experience of learning during university.”

Some students also remarked on how textbooks were critical for students with particular learning styles: “Textbooks are a valuable method of learning, especially for those who are tactile and visual learners. Not being able to buy them therefore would be a detriment to those who learn this way....”

## Academic impact: missing information essential for exams and other types of assessment

Many students specifically commented on how not purchasing a textbook had negative consequences for assessment. The frequency with which this impact was mentioned was consistent across both groups of students: 27% for those who had not purchased a textbook, and 28% for those who always purchased textbooks.

In some cases, students reported that the ability to complete assessment requirements depended on having an access code which can only be obtained by purchasing a new copy of the course textbook. “All textbooks for my courses this semester had an online portion that is included with the textbook and required for the course,” one student commented. “Without the code the course cannot be completed.” “You miss out on important course material that is required for tests/quizzes/participation grades,” reported another.

In other comments, the relationship between the textbook and assessment practices was less direct, although the impact was no less noteworthy. For example, students reported that exam and test questions were based on textbook content, or required readings for assignments were found within the course text, putting those students without a textbook in a disadvantageous position.

“Professors always take questions directly from the textbook that are not in their lecture notes,” one respondent remarked. Another student said, “there is always information on the midterms/exams that pertain to textbook readings only (not covered in class). By not being able to afford the textbook, we miss out entirely on getting these answers.” One of the comments put it this way: “Assignments/quizzes/etc.. based solely on textbook readings make it almost like we're paying for our grades.”

Many students also noted that textbooks were critical study tools, as they contain practice problems and solutions that may not be available anywhere else. “It helps for midterms. Only found this out after I did poorly and then had access to textbook,” one student reported.

Another frequently noted downside was that students without a textbook are at a disadvantage when it comes to open-book exams. As one student noted, “several courses have open textbook midterms/quizzes, not having this resource greatly reduces your chances of success.”

## Academic impact: lower grades

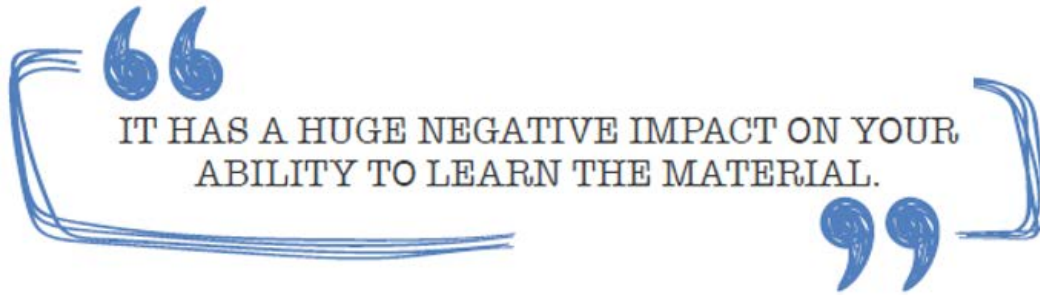
Impact on test marks and final grades was also a common concern. Of all of the respondents who mentioned academic impacts, this concern was expressed by 27% of the students who always purchased textbooks, and slightly less so (21%) by the students who had opted not to purchase textbooks. While comments in this category overlapped somewhat with comments about learning impacts and assessment impacts, the common thread in this case was that students felt there was a direct link between not having the textbook and receiving lower marks in a course.

**86%**  
REPORTED  
ACADEMIC  
**DOWNSIDES**  
TO **NOT**  
**PURCHASING**  
TEXTBOOKS

One student described it this way:

*“For one of my classes I studied purely lecture material and went into the final exam realizing that the majority of questions were on textbook material. I had to completely guess over 50% of the exam. This dropped my mark substantially in a course I could have done really well in if I had bought the textbook. But it was way too expensive.”*

Some of the comments suggested that a student’s final grade in a course was also impacted by the stress induced by not having the textbook. “Not being able to purchase a required textbook puts you at risk [of] not be properly prepared, creating stress,” a student reported, “which directly affects your mark in the given course.” Another comment noted “it affects your grade in that class, due to lack of confidence, lack of resources, and obviously lack of knowledge.”



IT HAS A HUGE NEGATIVE IMPACT ON YOUR  
ABILITY TO LEARN THE MATERIAL.

A small number of students suggested that settling for a lower mark in a course was a choice they made in order to have funds available for other necessities. “It’s a sacrifice of around 15% off my final grade but sometimes it’s worth it,” was one student’s perspective.

Another pointed out “if you can’t afford to buy a textbook you have less opportunity to learn than your classmates. Your grade could be lower solely because you are not from the same socioeconomic background.”

### **Other academic impacts**

Survey respondents also reported that falling behind in class was a significant impact of not purchasing a textbook, as was the feeling that they were at a disadvantage compared to the others in the class that had purchased a textbook. Each of these two downsides were reported by 7% of all students who reported academic consequences in their comments.

Comments on falling behind ranged from “time management becomes more complicated” to “harder to stay up to date with course readings” to “[you] fall behind in class and don’t know what the HELL IS GOING ON.” In some cases, the comments linked the inability to keep up with coursework to difficulties in finding alternate sources of information, or challenges with getting their hands on a library or friend’s copy of the textbook. In other cases, students felt falling behind was a result of feeling less prepared for classes and less knowledgeable about the course content. “You constantly feel behind and nervous that you are missing something,” one of the respondents confessed. Another stated, “[it] means I will not always be able to follow along in class and participate in discussion.”

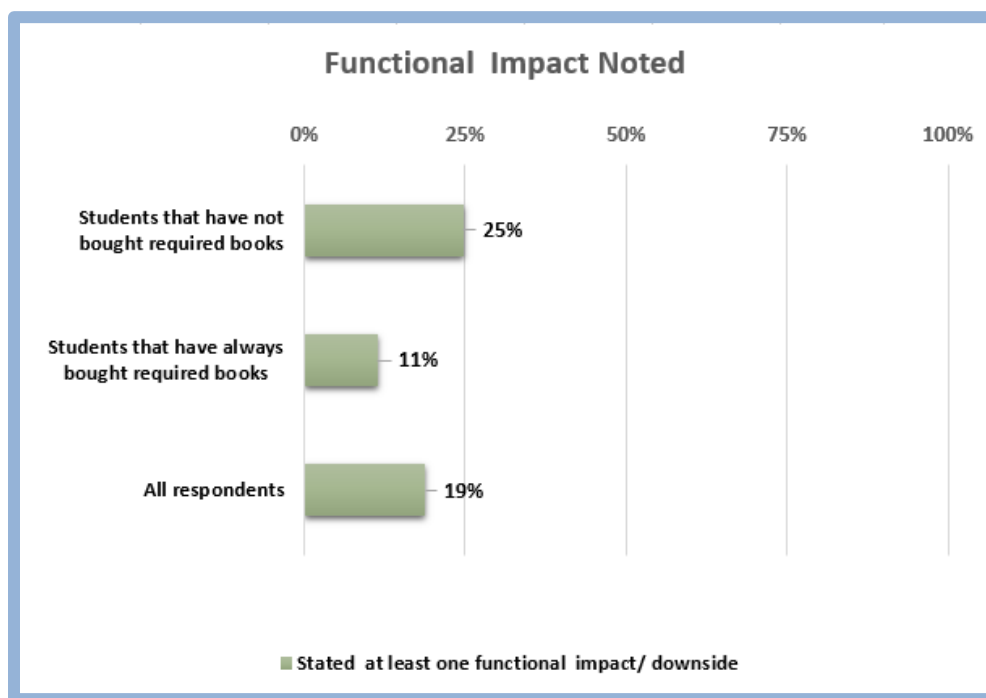
Similarly, students commented on how not having a textbook made them feel that they were at a disadvantage with respect to their peers. “I feel like students with the financial resources to purchase the textbook had a better opportunity to succeed in the course,” said one respondent. Another felt that “you’re

getting less out of your education than someone who is financially capable of buying personal copies of all of the books. It is not fair.”

### Functional Impacts

Some of the downsides that students reported fell into categories that the task force labelled as “functional” downsides. In other words, these were impacts not directly related to academic success, but which nevertheless were considered to be negative consequences by the students who commented on them. In most instances, these were issues of a practical nature, which focused on the impact on students’ day to day activities and behaviours.

Functional downsides were noted far more frequently by students who had not purchased a textbook than by those who always purchased them. As the chart below illustrates, only 11% of students who always purchased textbooks anticipated any kind of functional downside, while these kinds of issues were identified by 25% of the respondents who did not always purchase textbooks. This suggests that students who always purchase textbooks may have less awareness of some of the practical frustrations experienced by the students who are living with the reality of doing without textbooks.

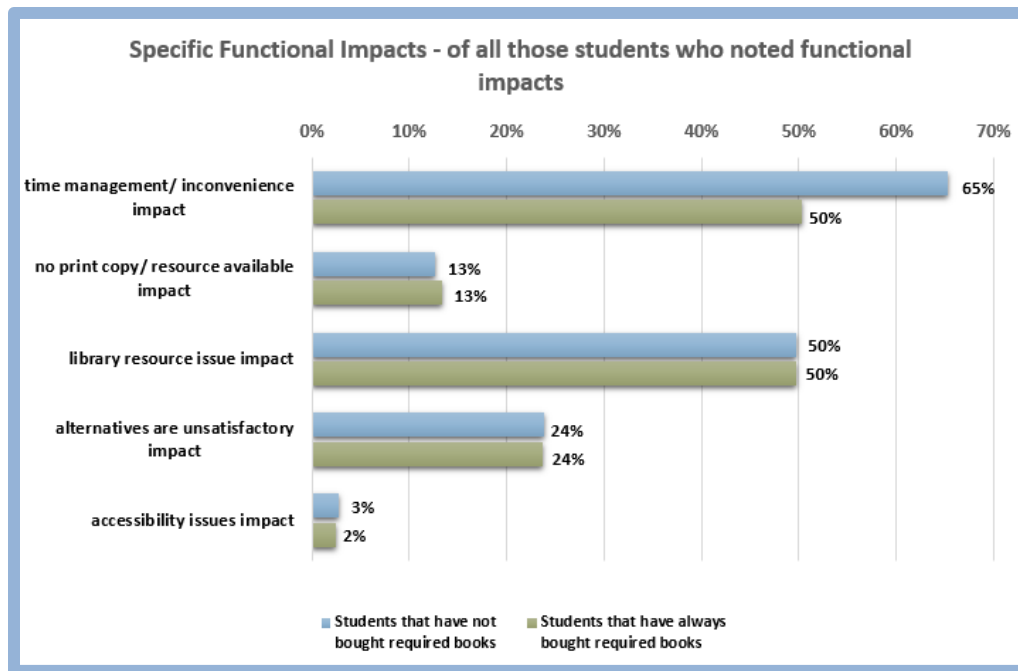


In general, students’ comments about the functional downsides of not having a textbook fell into five subcategories:

- impact on time management; inconvenience
- not having a print copy
- issues with accessing a library copy of the textbook
- dissatisfaction with alternative options
- accessibility impact

The chart below illustrates the extent to which each of these impacts was cited by the respondents. Note

that the percentages do not add up to 100%, as students often reported more than one of these impacts in their comments.



### Functional impact: time management/inconvenience

Of all the functional downsides to not purchasing a textbook that were noted, the most frequently cited was the impact on time management, or in other words, the inconvenience of not having a textbook. Again, this issue was noted far more frequently in the comments of students who had actually lived through the experience of not having a textbook (65%, vs. 50% for those who always purchase textbooks).

Comments on how the lack of a textbook impacted the students' ability to manage their time were wide-ranging, but generally focused on the challenges of having to find the textbook content somewhere else. "Always having to go to the library to borrow a copy is time consuming and inconvenient sometimes, especially when the library is busy," noted one student. "You don't get access to the materials at a convenient time; sometimes forced to cram because of textbook availability...get readings done late," commented another student.

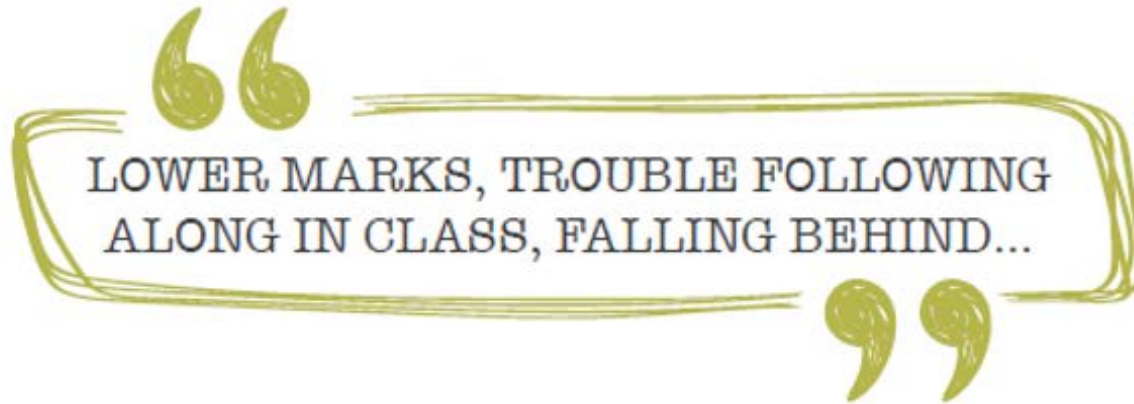
"Quickly looking up things is difficult if you need more clarification" one student explained, "often I'm at home and am like 'if I had the textbook now that would be quick to look up'. Instead I have to search through the internet." Other comments cited: "inability to work with the textbook for long periods of time", "having to inconvenience others," and "accommodating to other people's schedules" as typical problems they encountered when finding alternate access to the course textbook.

"For students living off campus there are few valid alternatives," pointed out one of the comments. Other students noted that they were at the mercy of library hours and bus schedules.

### Functional impact: library resource availability

Closely linked to the issue of time management and inconvenience was the problem of getting access to a copy of the required text in the library. Recall that 27% of students who did not purchase a textbook reported using a copy in the library instead. Also, students who reported multiple approaches to accessing the necessary textbook usually included borrowing a library copy as one of their options.

Of all the comments that made reference to some kind of functional downside, 50% noted that access to a library copy of the textbook was problematic. This was equally true for both students who always purchased textbooks, and those who did not.



While the inconvenience of having to go to the library to access a copy has already been noted, comments in this subcategory also focused on the availability (or lack of availability) of library copies, the high demand for them, the limitations on the amount of time a library copy could be borrowed for, and the inability to use library copies outside of the library premises.<sup>9</sup>

Many students commented on the fact that the library copies are in high demand, and there are often insufficient copies on reserve for the number of students needing them. “There are usually so few copies on reserve at the library that it's tough to get your hands on a copy near midterms/exams,” was a common complaint. One student remarked, “Library reserves are not enough for all the textbook nonpurchasers,” while another student noted, “It is very difficult to sign out the course reserve books from the library because so many students are in the same position with not being able to afford the textbooks.”

Some students suggested that the excessive demand for limited numbers of reserve copies of the textbook was creating stress among students who were competing for access. “I always had to read in the library to get the information, and had to compete with the others in my class who were doing this so that I could read it. Very frustrating,” one student lamented. Another said, “If you're in an online course, and you need the textbook but don't want to buy it, literally everyone fights for it at the course reserve section in the library.”

Students also felt that the library's course reserve policies for print copies of textbooks were problematic. While the library's 2 hour, in-library use only policy is intended to maximize access to high-demand items for

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<sup>9</sup> At the University of Guelph, at the time of this survey, copies of required textbooks were only placed on course reserve at the request of the course's instructor. Physical copies located at the Reserve Desk were limited to 2 hour, in-library use only. In some cases, e-book versions were placed on reserve, but access was dependent upon the policy of the e-book publisher/vendor. In some cases, only one user can access the e-book at one time.



as many students as possible, it was clear that these restrictions cause frustration for many students. “You are only allowed to have the ones in the library out for 2 hours at a time and cannot bring them home [if on course reserve], which really limits study time,” one student complained, “and ones that they have in the library to take home are often older editions that do not contain the same information.” Another student felt that “taking out a course reserve for 2 hours at the library is not enough time.” One student suggested, “I think it should be at least 4 hours.”

Being limited to only using the library’s copy of the textbook on site was also a sore point with many students. “I like to study late at night and I cannot do that if I am using a library textbook,” was one of the comments. Students not living on campus found this particularly frustrating: “I live and commute from home, so not having a textbook means I can’t study from home (such as over the weekend) and may be forced to have to drive to Guelph.”

Finally, there were a number of other comments that generally pointed to the lack of satisfaction with using a library copy as a substitute for one’s own copy of a work. As one student put it “You can’t make notes within a library or borrowed copy, you can’t study from home if you’re using a library copy.” Another student pointed out that borrowing the library’s copy “can cost you late fees,” while another noted, “It’s not great for studying on the holidays as the library is typically closed on holidays.”

There was also concern expressed that the library was not an ideal study environment for some students:

*“Not all students work best in public environments. I personally get stressed out studying in the library as I am anxious about irritating other students by making any noise and like to do some reading at home or on my commute to work/school. For some classes, I need to do book reports. Having to read a 400 page book in a few weeks at the library would be very stressful and a major hassle.”*

### **Functional impact: unsatisfactory alternatives**

This subcategory of student comments captured all of the concerns students expressed regarding the lack of suitable alternatives to purchasing the required text. Twenty-four per cent of the students who noted at least one functional impact also expressed dissatisfaction with the available alternatives to buying a textbook. This number was the same for both the students who had opted not to purchase textbooks and those who always purchased textbooks.

In Question 2 a), students who reported not purchasing a textbook at least once were asked to indicate what they did instead. In response to this question, 27% said they used a library copy, 22% downloaded a copy, and 17% used a friend’s copy. Of the remaining responses, 28% said they did not use (or were unable to find) any alternative access to the textbook, while 5% reported “other” options (mostly a combination of the first three). The preceding section on Library Resource Availability addresses why students were unsatisfied with using the library for textbook access, but the other alternatives students used were also sources of frustration.

For example, students who downloaded an unauthorized version of the textbook they found on the internet, expressed concern about the legal and ethical implications of doing so (“Most PDF copies are illegal”), as well as their feeling that it was often a poor substitute for having a print copy of the book.

**88%**  
**EXPRESSED**  
**CONCERN**  
**ABOUT NOT**  
**HAVING THE**  
**TEXTBOOK**

“Downloaded versions can be difficult to use and don't always work. Open book exams do not allow the use of a nonhard copy text,” was one student’s comment. Another student reported the “Risk getting virus or susceptible to hackers if choosing to download bootlegged version.” Several of the comments noted that actually finding a PDF version on the internet took time and effort, and that online versions often turned out to be the wrong edition of the text. One student felt that the textbook affordability problem “encourages pirating textbooks.” Another remarked that “Online textbooks can be found but these are often pirated copies. Students are forced to choose between getting a lower grade and becoming a pirate.”

Students also commented on their dissatisfaction with sharing textbooks, or borrowing from a friend. “Borrowing is a bad habit,” noted one student. “I find highlighting and writing in textbooks the only way to really learn the material so I need my own copy,” indicated another respondent. “Coordinating sharing textbooks is very difficult,” another student commented,

“as peak textbook use time is the same.”

Some students who indicated that they always purchased textbooks also had frustrations with the lack of options available. “The textbook that was required was sold out at all book stores, and no used copies were sold by students as the Edition was new to the semester,” commented one. Some students struggled with timing issues, as “Online copies were shipped from the U.S, so they would take approx. a month to deliver.” Other students reported that it was a common occurrence to “...have to go to other places to find textbooks, like online, used from the Cannon<sup>10</sup>, or Amazon.ca.”

### **Other functional Impacts**

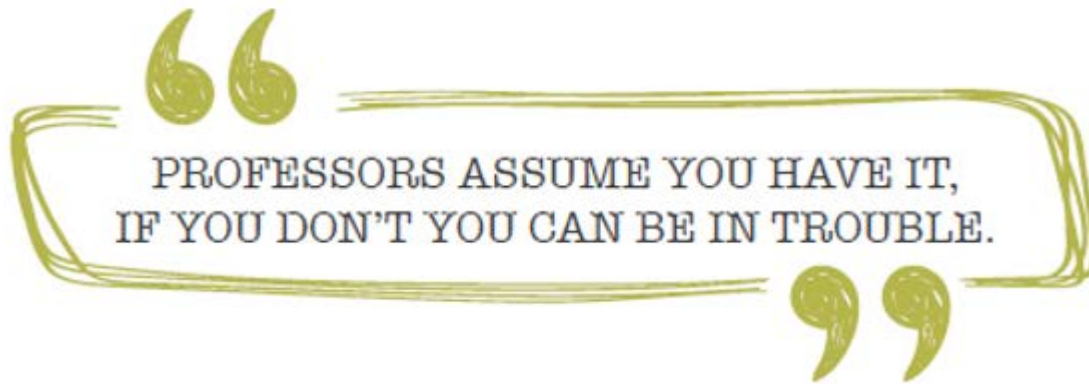
Other functional downsides to not owning a required textbook included not having one’s own print copy, and accessibility impacts. While these were reported by a fairly small number of students compared to other impacts, the frequency with which these issues were mentioned contributes to the story. Thirteen per cent of survey respondents who noted at least one functional downside indicated that the lack of a print version of the textbook was a problem. And 3% noted that not having a textbook resulted in negative consequences for students with perceptual disabilities.

Some of the reported issues with not having a print copy have been noted elsewhere in this report, but many students specifically commented on their preference for print copies. “Using a digital copy of a

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<sup>10</sup> The Cannon is a University of Guelph online community through which students can buy and sell used textbooks. See <https://thecannon.ca/>.

textbook is really hard on your eyes,” was a common complaint. “You...end up studying from a screen, which personally gives me a headache,” one student noted. Other students mentioned the practical advantages of having a print version of the textbook, such as, “I like having the physical book to be able to flip between topics easier and have the materials open on CourseLink and the textbook at the same time.”



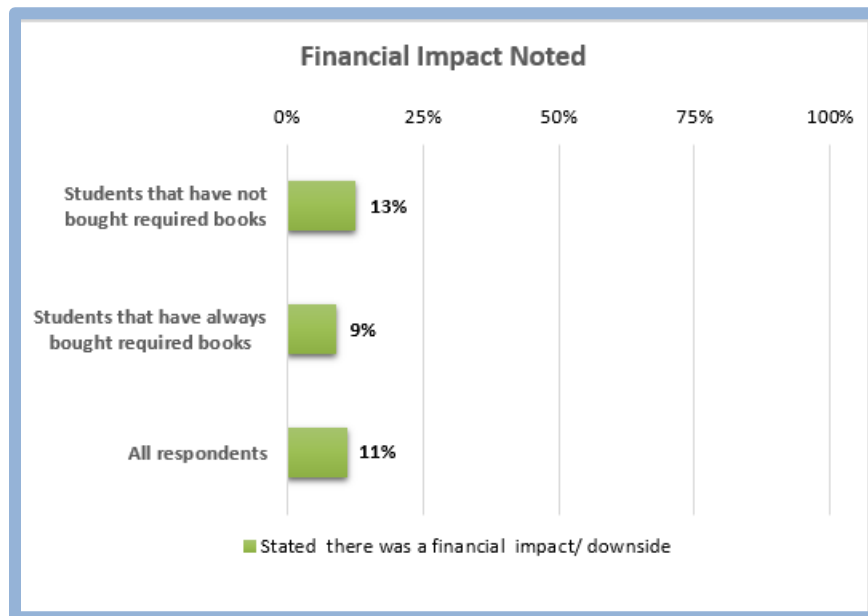
The downside of not having a textbook for students with disabilities was highlighted by several students. “If you suffer from any sort of disability that requires you to miss classes (and you're unable to get notes bc notetakers quickly diminish after 2nd year), the textbook can help you catch up on what you missed,” commented one of the respondents. Another student pointed out: “As a student with a disability, sometimes the only way to effectively apply assistive technology is to purchase the full textbook.”

As one student expressed it, the problem with not purchasing a textbook is that it means students may not have access to course materials in a format that works best for them:

*“[Limited access to textbooks] may cause anxiety in some students or stress out students who need more time to learn via reading or just [to] read in general. I think students should have access to whatever they need to learn the material best. Some people learn best from lecture and don't need a textbook, other people find the textbook priceless when it comes to learning and studying. Either way, the students should have access to what they need.”*

### **Financial Impacts**

When asked about the downsides of not purchasing a textbook, the number of students who made comments concerning financial issues was noteworthy. In some cases, they expressed anger and frustration about the cost of textbooks, about whether they were getting good value for money, and about textbook business models that limited their choices. In other cases, they simply stated the facts about their financial situation and the impact that purchasing textbooks had on their budget. There were more comments of this nature from students who had opted not to purchase textbooks (13% of all students who commented), but the students who indicated they always bought textbooks also reported financial impacts (9% of all students who commented). It is important to note that a decision to purchase required texts may also include a decision to compromise or not purchase other necessities such as food or lodging.



A student who always purchased textbooks summed up the financial struggle that many students reported: “a lot of the textbooks are extremely costly and some courses require more than one book making it hard to stay within a student budget.” The impact of purchasing textbooks, according to another student, was “financial strains; having to live on a tight budget , and having less money to spend on necessities”.

For the students who had opted not to purchase textbooks, the comments reflected some of the tough financial choices they had been required to make. “Tuition and living expenses are already very high,” noted one, “I can't afford to buy a textbook costing a half months rent.” Another student commented that “I'm facing a trade-off now between getting good enough grades to impress the people who will control my future and being able to meet my basic needs such as food. I have to choose food.”

There were a number of comments, like this one, that expressed frustration at the limited choices available to students who do not have the financial means to buy new textbooks:

*“Not everyone can afford to purchase new textbooks, and the bookstore is often out of used copies. The co-op isn't that much cheaper, and it's sometimes difficult to find the most current edition you need on the Cannon. Most courses either require the textbook or have extra info/practice to enhance your education; it's unfair that students who can't afford ridiculous textbook costs should receive a lesser education than those whose parents float them.”*

A similar sense of injustice was echoed in many of the comments, along with anger that the cost of education was already excessive without adding textbook costs to the equation. “I am already paying thousands for my education,” one student pointed out, “I shouldn't have to pay an extra \$200 per class to get REQUIRED resources.” “It felt like I worked hard to get into school and pay for it, just to have to pay more to do better in the class. It seems unfair that the price is out of a lot of students' budgets,” another student lamented, “I feel like textbooks are becoming a privilege only available to kids from upper-class families.”

Students also had a lot to say about whether or not textbooks were good value for money. In many cases, they reported purchasing textbooks only to discover they were not really needed. “Having to determine if

“ I SHOULDN'T HAVE TO PUT A CASH VALUE ON MY ABILITY TO DO WELL IN A COURSE. ”

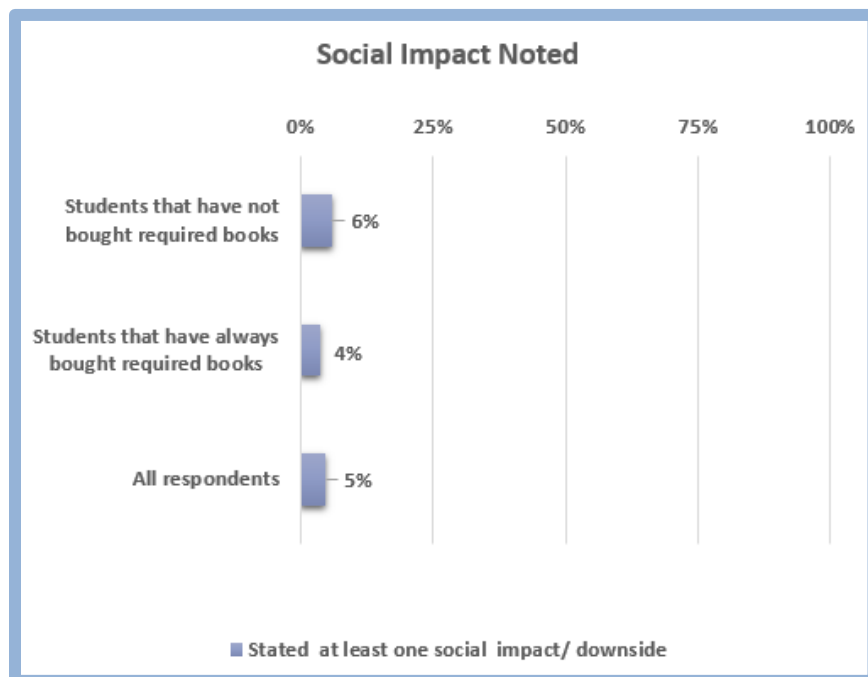
spending \$200 is worth buy a 'required' textbook is difficult, especially when you don't know how required the textbook actually is," reasoned one student. Another commenter felt that there was undue pressure placed on students to purchase expensive textbooks: "I think that often the 'requiredness' of a textbook is over exaggerated (especially in first and second year classes), placing undue financial stress on naive students."

Other students expressed unhappiness about being required to purchase new editions of textbooks all the time. "A lot of these textbooks you have to buy new because they've been 'updated,' it's beyond frustrating," one student stated. Another student commented about how textbook prices compound what is already an expensive education: "With University being expensive as is, some students can't afford a laptop. Then you ask \$1000 per semester for textbooks that are updated every year."

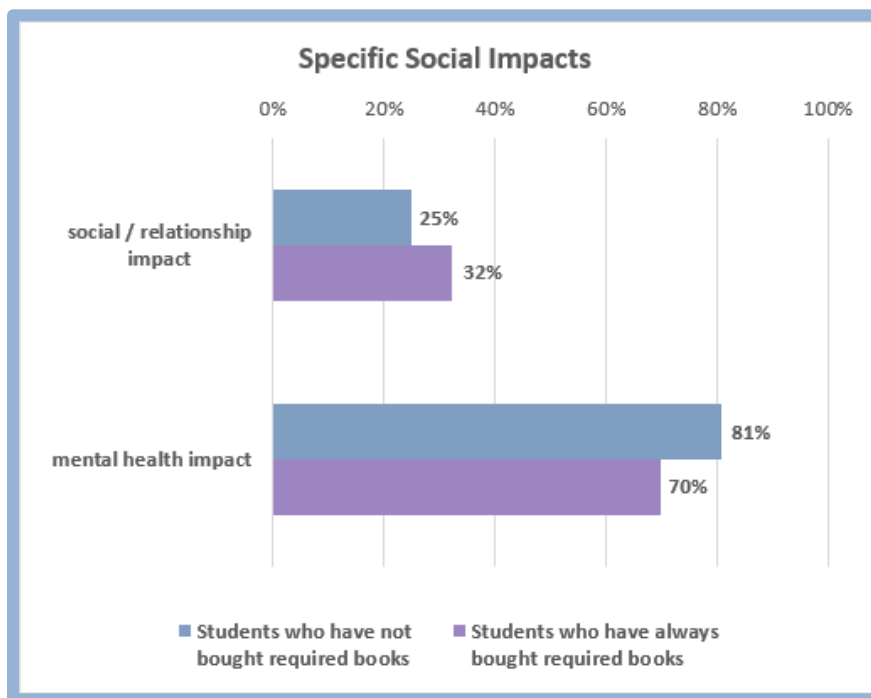
Comments also expressed frustration that the market for used textbooks has all but disappeared. "My biggest frustration is due to my inability to sell or buy used copies of the textbook. The editions are updated so frequently that I am now left with a pile of expensive and somehow outdated textbooks that I JUST PURCHASED," reported one student.

### Social Impacts

When asked about the downsides of not being able to purchase a textbook, some of the students' responses contained references to issues that the task force categorized as "social" impacts. Of all of the students who submitted comments, 5% (or 160 students), made explicit reference to such issues.



The “social impacts” category was further divided into “social/relationship impacts” and “mental health impacts.” The chart below illustrates the extent to which each of these impacts was cited by the respondents. Note that the percentages do not add up to 100%, as students often reported more than one social impact in their comments.



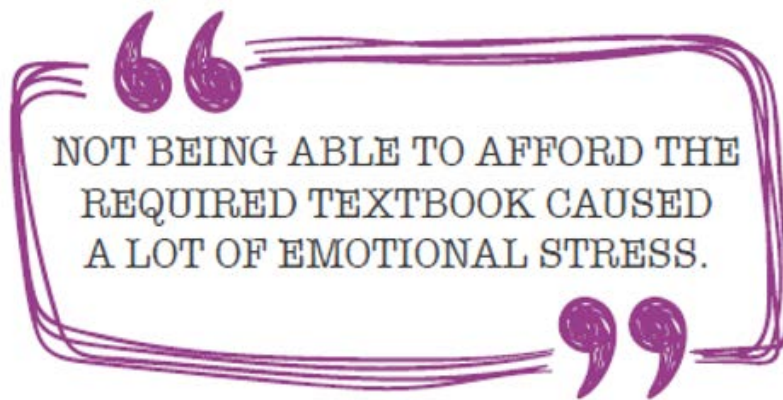
### Social/Relationship Impacts

The subcategory of “social/relationship impacts” captured issues ranging from relationships with friends, to social inequality, to issues such as copyright infringement and piracy. Out of all the students who explicitly identified issues in the “social impact” category, 32% of students who always bought textbooks, and 25% of those who did not, identified some type of social or relationship concern. It was interesting to note that more of the students who always bought textbooks commented on social/relationship issues than those who did not always buy textbooks. This may indicate that students who always bought textbooks did so in part because of concerns about social/relationship issues if they did not (for example, due to a worry that they would be seen as different from their peers if they did not have the textbook). A number of the comments focussed on the perceived inequities between students who purchased textbooks and those who did not. In some cases the perceptions were based on a student’s ability to pay for textbooks, with students who could not afford them reporting feeling inferior to those who could. For example, one student indicated that not having the required textbook meant dealing with “[the] embarrassment of not being able to afford it.” Another student commented, “If you can’t buy it without breaking the bank, you have no choice but to not get it. Makes you feel lesser of yourself.”

In other cases, the inequity was related to academic success, with those students who did not purchase textbooks perceiving that they were less successful than others in their class. “[It] puts you behind your peers in terms of potential for success,” read one of the comments. “This can be very discouraging and

disheartening.” Another student reported “getting behind in class, judgements from peers” among the downsides of not having a textbook.

Some of the comments reflected on social relationship issues caused by not having a textbook, such as the “...strain on friendships from borrowing it,” as one student noted. “Makes you dependant on others for your own education” was the feeling expressed in another comment. One respondent suggested that not having



the textbook “might also leave the student feeling disconnected from prof, school, & course. Maybe even [from] fellow students.”

Another student suggested that the social impact extended beyond peer relationships: “if I can’t afford it and it is required, its very difficult for myself and my family.”

### Mental Health Impacts

Comments in which students mentioned their emotions, state of mind, or general health and well-being were included in this subcategory. In some cases, the students were referring to themselves, while in other cases, their comments were about students generally, or about what they had observed in their peers. Out of all the students who explicitly identified issues in the “social impact” category, 70% of students who always bought textbooks, and 81% of those who did not, identified some type of emotional/mental health concern. In this case, it is noteworthy that more of the students who did not purchase textbooks reported mental health impacts.

The most commonly reported impact in this subcategory was anxiety, or stress. Sometimes comments were general (“It makes students anxious”), while others were quite specific as to the factors that caused them stress. “When not being able to buy a textbook due to financial issues becomes a reality, it is a very stressful event. This stress carries through until the end of the course” one student reported.

“Difficulty in accessing crucial information needed for the assignments and tests lead to unnecessary stress... therefore leading to degraded student life and grades” suggested one of the comments. Another student, who always purchased textbooks, speculated on what he expected it must be like for students who could not afford them:

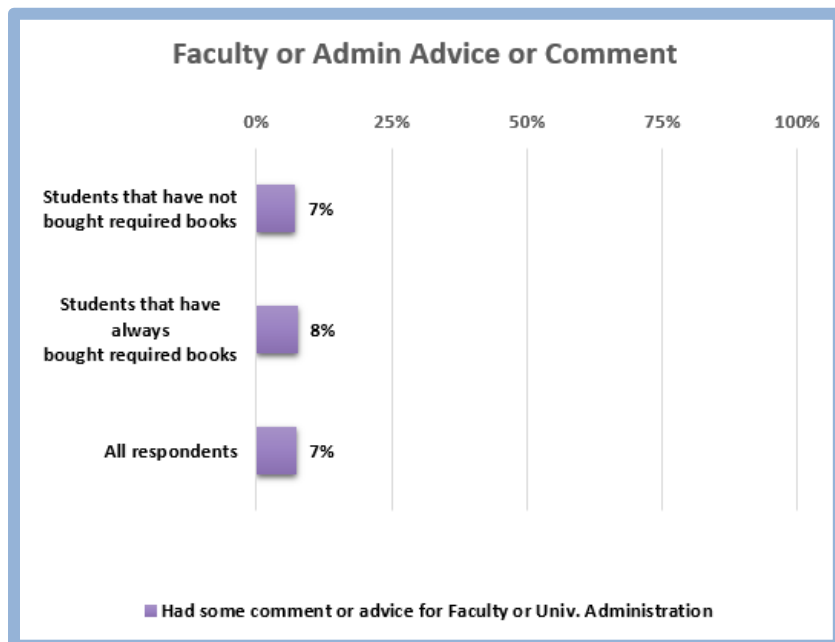
*“This is probably immensely stressful, and too much stress is damaging to physical and mental health. Also, the very thought of someone who is unable to purchase their required books speaks to [the] saddest downside, namely, the fact that a person is in a situation where they are evidently struggling to provide the tools for themselves to be successful in life, and have to endure being conscious of it”.*

Others reported self-esteem issues, feeling “lost”, and feeling insecure. “Textbooks would have given me more confidence in the course” one student suggested. “It makes me insecure about the class ahead and I

feel walking into the exams that I am not as prepared,” was another student’s comment, “but I can't afford the textbook so I have to deal.”

### **Comment on Faculty Member or University**

Some of the students who commented on the downsides of not purchasing a textbook expressed opinions about their instructors, and the university generally. Many such comments took the form of suggestions for how the situation might be improved for students. Of all the students who provided comments on the downside of not having a textbook, responses of this nature were expressed by 7% of the students who did not always buy textbooks, and 8% of the students who always bought textbooks.



Many students made comments about how much their courses were structured around a required text, and the extent to which instructors based their teaching and assessment on the textbook. “No matter what professors or other students say, whether it is for exams or for a paper the textbook is always required.” said one student, “The professors assume you have it, if you don't you can be in trouble.”

“I don't think it's thoughtful of professors to assign a required textbook.....with there being no other way to access the book... and tell us we ‘need’ it,” indicated another student. “Classes are meant to teach you therefore I don't think classes should rely heavily on textbooks” was the opinion of another student.

There were also complaints about instructors requiring students to pay for commercial platforms instead of using CourseLink:

*“...some classes require subscriptions to online platforms other than courselink. If you do not pay for the subscription (i.e. Top Hat, Mind Tap etc.) you cannot complete and submit weekly homework assignments and will then miss out on marks even if you fully understand the material otherwise. Most of the uses for these other platforms can and would be satisfied through courselink if the professor decided to make proper use of it.”*

A number of comments focussed on the variation in the extent to which faculty use the required textbook in



any given course, and how this lack of predictability is often a problem for students. “It is difficult to foresee which texts will be heavily used in a course and which just happen to be written by the professor” indicated one student. “What if I need it for my class? What if it's used for assignments? I always buy my textbooks because of the ‘what if’s’(although that doesn't mean I always use them),” another student noted.

One student felt that the extent to which the textbook is used “...depends LARGELY on the professor and their choice of book.” Another student reported that “many professors go off of the textbook (in many cases their own textbook) a lot. Whether they cover the same topics in class or not, most professors make sure to point out how critical the textbook is to understand lectures better.” Some of the comments indicated that instructors required students to bring the textbook to class with them, making it virtually impossible for them to opt out of purchasing it.

Some of the students directed their anger more generally at the university system: “It is a money grab by professors and the whole university system. Students are overcharged and scammed in first year”. Another student felt that “If you have been accepted to university and your classes, [the] university should not allow you to fail because you can't afford books.”

Other students went further and put forward ideas as to how the university should be dealing with the issue of textbook affordability. One student suggested that “each class should state how much they will cost” so that students are aware of how much textbooks will cost them before choosing to enrol in a course. Another student commented, “I think every student should be given an electronic version of required textbooks and the option to buy the physical copy. The school should start treating their students as students and not just customers.”

## Conclusions

The responses to the survey questions, as well as the many comments that the survey respondents provided, yielded a wealth of information about the behaviours and attitudes of University of Guelph students with respect to required textbooks. The task force was surprised to learn the extent to which students were opting not to buy textbooks. Even more concerning, however, was the fact that students overwhelmingly reported negative outcomes resulting from their decision not to purchase a required textbook. The survey reveals a potentially serious disconnect between the expectations of instructors (and by extension, the University), and the lived experiences of students. Faced with tight budgets, students reported that they are regularly making decisions to do without textbooks, or attempting to get by with often unsatisfactory alternatives, in order to balance their need to do well in a course with their need for essentials such as food and housing. In doing so, they report significant impacts in such areas as academic success, learning outcomes, social relationships and mental health, as well as their university experience generally.

The key conclusions reached by the task force as a result of conducting the survey are:

1. Students overwhelmingly see textbook content as critical to their learning and academic success.
2. Students are regularly opting not to purchase textbooks due to their excessive cost.
3. Some students feel that they are forced to choose between academic success and meeting their basic needs.

4. Current and emerging textbook business models limit the alternative options available to students who opt not to purchase a required textbook.
5. Students indicate that the alternatives that do exist are often unsatisfactory, causing them inconvenience, extra effort, lost time, and anxiety.
6. Students are having to engage in questionable copying practices or piracy in order to obtain the content they need.
7. Students who opt not to purchase a textbook report emotional, social, and health (including mental health) issues.
8. Students who do purchase textbooks clearly empathize with and often express similar concerns to those who do not.

## Action Items/Next Steps

The data from this survey will lay the groundwork for future activities of the OER/ACC Task Force. More specifically, as a result of the information gleaned from the survey, the task force intends to work towards making the following changes in order to address some of the issues students identified:

1. Beginning in the Fall 2017 semester, the Library will make available as many textbooks as possible via the Library's Course Reserve Service.
2. Changes to Library Course Reserve policies for textbook borrowing will also be considered, in order to enable more effective and equitable access for students who rely on Library copies.
3. A method of eliciting regular student feedback on the usefulness of Course Reserve services with respect to providing access to textbooks will be implemented. Options include a bookmark that students could fill out and return, or a brief online survey.
4. Data from the University Bookstore will be regularly collected and reviewed in order to better understand the context of commercial textbooks and course materials at the university.
5. The Student Textbook (#textbookbroke) Survey itself will be updated and refined to collect pertinent demographic and program- information in order to improve the quality and usefulness of data next time the survey is administered.

## Recommendations

Recognizing that the work of the ACC/OER task force does not exist in a vacuum and that more systemic changes will be necessary if we are to move forward with addressing the issue of textbook affordability at the University, the task force also recommends the following:

1. That a program be implemented with the goal of raising awareness and promoting the use of Open Educational Resources (OER) with faculty and other instructors, as a mechanism for decreasing the dependence on commercial textbooks while improving access to resources, and by extension, learning outcomes for students.
2. That efforts be made to create an environment on campus in which the creation/adoption of OER by instructors is encouraged and rewarded.

3. That a faculty incentive program be established to provide compensation (monetary or otherwise) to instructors who choose to adapt or create an open educational resource for a course.
4. That the university engage with student leaders in a conversation about the survey results and agree upon approaches for moving forward with addressing the issues that the survey respondents identified. Consideration should be given to ideas such as providing cost information about required textbooks in the course calendar, so students have this information before they register for a course.

October 18, 2017

Accessible Course Content and Open Educational Resources Task Force:

Heather Martin, Copyright Officer and Manager, E-Learning and Reserve Services, Library

Ali Versluis, Research and Scholarship Librarian, Library

Melanie Cassidy, Learning and Curriculum Support Librarian, Library

Ron Ward, Senior Research Officer, Library

Natalie Green, Manager, Distance Education, Open Learning and Educational Support

Becca Cheskes, VP Academic, Central Student Association

# Appendix A - Survey Composition

## Preamble

Are you "textbook broke"?

Purchasing textbooks is a significant expenditure for most university students, and the cost per semester has been increasing dramatically. It has been estimated that the cost of textbooks in Canada in the past 10 years has increased at four times the rate of inflation. Some students are now spending upwards of \$1,000 per semester on required resources for courses.

The CSA (Central Students Association) is interested in knowing how students at the University of Guelph are being affected by the rising cost of textbooks. Please take a few minutes to complete this survey and let us know. The information you provide will help to inform initiatives aimed at making course materials more affordable and accessible for students.

If you would like to enter to win a \$25 Hospitality Gift Card, you will be prompted to do so once you have completed the survey. This will allow us to ensure confidentiality by keeping survey answers separate from email accounts. To be entered into the draw, please complete this survey by October 21st, 2016.

## Survey Questions

**Question 1:** In total, how much did you spend on textbooks this semester for all of your classes?

- \$0 - \$250
- \$251-\$500
- \$501-\$750
- \$751-\$1,000
- \$1,001-\$1,500
- More than \$1,500

**Question 2:** Have you ever not purchased a required textbook?

- Yes
- No

*Students who answered YES to Question 2 were presented with the following questions:*

**Question 2 (a):** If you didn't purchase the required textbook, what did you do instead?

- Used the library's copy
- Used a friend's copy
- Downloaded it
- Other solution
- Didn't use a textbook at all

If you selected "Other Solution", please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

**Question 2 (b):** How concerned were you about not having the required textbook?

- Very concerned
- Somewhat concerned
- Not at all concerned

**Question 3:** Do you see any downsides to not being willing/able to buy a required textbook? If yes, please explain.

- No
- Yes \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B - Categories for Coding Student Comments

These categories emerged from the comments that were supplied in response to Question 3 - Please explain the downsides to not being willing/able to buy a required textbook.

Category	Sample Comments
Academic - reduced learning / understanding	"harder to grasp concepts" "textbooks explain better than profs"
Academic - missing important information re course curriculum <sup>11</sup>	"not having access to required or supplementary readings" "Not being able to meet curriculum expectations"
Academic - missing content essential to exams and other assessment <sup>12</sup>	"missing content needed for exams" "all the practice questions come from the textbook"
Academic - falling behind	"Not being able to catch up in the course" "Not being able to follow along in class"
Academic - lower grades	"you will fail the course" "hard to get a good mark in tests and exams"
Academic - disadvantage compared to peers	"people who can't afford textbook are at a disadvantage" "Not being able to do as well in classes as students who have higher economic status"
Functional: time management / inconvenience	"Not being able to study whenever I want to" "inconvenient to always borrow from a friend"
Functional: library resource availability	"not enough copies on reserve" "can only use library copy for two hours"
Functional: alternatives are unsatisfactory	"downloaded versions don't always work" "sharing with friends is not ideal"
Functional: not having a print copy	"not able to highlight or mark up the book" "we are unable to bring in pdf copies to open book exams"
Functional: accessibility <sup>13</sup>	"have to purchase textbook in order to get accessible copy"
Financial impacts	"I need the money for food" "sometimes it's not worth it as the prof doesn't use it"
Social/Relationship impacts	"strain on friendships from borrowing textbook" "judgements from peers"

<sup>11</sup> The word curriculum here refers to non-graded components of coursework, such as readings or lecture materials.

<sup>12</sup> In this context, assessment includes exams, quizzes, essays, and other formally graded portions of coursework.

<sup>13</sup> The use of the term accessibility here is meant to address issues pertaining to the design of textbooks and course materials for those who experience disabilities, rather than general availability of those materials.

Mental health impact	<i>“causes me stress”</i> <i>“I feel isolated”</i>
Comment on Faculty/University	<i>“profs rely too much on textbooks”</i> <i>“we already pay too much in tuition”</i>