

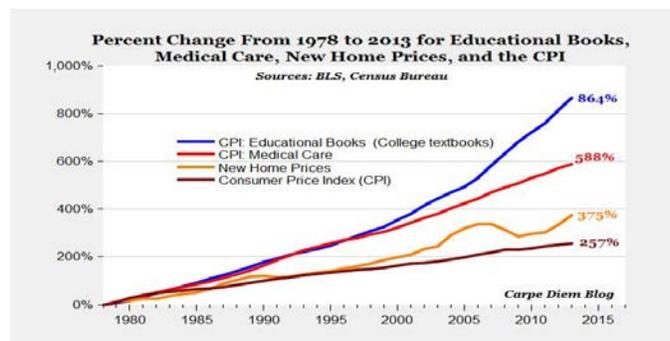
# Textbook and Homework Access Code Costs in Higher Education: Student, Academic Dean and Department Head Perspectives on Costs and Implications for Learning

Anita Walz, Virginia Tech

**Abstract:** Increased costs of college textbooks by 864% between 1978 and 2013 has spurred numerous studies and expanded student, faculty, library, bookstore, and administrative efforts to reduce costs while maintaining or enhancing student learning potentials. Recent state and national student surveys report substantive impacts of required textbook costs including: student perceived reduction in academic achievement, negative impacts on drop-fail-withdraw rates, and students increasingly treating required materials as optional (Hill, 2016). In an effort to understand local experience, a mixed-methods study replicated and extended multiple student survey questions at a large research university. A companion survey of College Deans and Department Heads at the same institution identified the presence of conversation, concerns, and coordinated and ad-hoc responses to rising textbook and homework software costs. This presentation will highlight findings at one large research university in comparison to and beyond the national context.

## Literature Review

Policy impacts, market studies, and studies of student behavior in response to cost comprise much of the literature surrounding student textbook affordability. In 2005 the U.S. General Accountability Office (GAO) examined reasons for rising textbook costs and in 2013 examined whether the textbook cost reporting requirements of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008 (in force July 2010) eased textbook costs for students or changed levels of faculty awareness (GAO, 2013). Advocacy group, U.S. PIRGs issued a series of reports (2014, 2016) regarding market failure and principle-agent problems in textbook selection (U.S. PIRGs, 2014), and the evolution of selling electronic homework submission systems with short-term access (PIRG, 2016). Florida Virtual Campus has also studied student responses to textbook costs.



© 2014, Mark Perry, Scholar at American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.  
[https://twitter.com/Mark\\_J\\_Perry/status/459395162032988160/photo/1](https://twitter.com/Mark_J_Perry/status/459395162032988160/photo/1)  
<http://www.aei-ideas.org/2012/12/the-college-textbook-bubble-and-how-the-open-educational-resources-movement-is-going-up-against-the-textbook-cartel>

## Methodology

Survey 1: A representative sample of 3,100 undergraduate and graduate students was identified by the Office of Institutional Research at a research university with an enrollment of 30,000 students. Students were invited via email to participate in a 24-question mixed methods survey. The survey investigated students' reported spending on textbooks, homework software access codes, and other required learning materials, student practices regarding acquisition of required learning material (buy, rent, borrow, find online, go without etc.), student income sources beyond savings (working, financial aid), student level of concern regarding costs and impact of costs on course grades, no-cost learning resources used (assigned or not assigned), student-reported reading habits, and self-reported current GPAs. Students were also asked to describe the impact of costs of required learning materials on them and their learning.

Survey 2: The Dean and Department-head survey was distributed via email to 125 Deans, Department Heads (and Associate/Assistant), Department or Program Chairs at the same institution. The one-minute-survey was by a Dean level administrator and requested responses to two questions: whether the College or Department has discussed the high cost of textbooks and other learning materials, and what if any response is in place or planned. Respondents were also asked for additional comments.

## Results

Survey 1: (n=362; 11.6% response rate) 54% and 46% of students reported being “significantly concerned” regarding the cost of textbook and homework software access codes, respectively. An additional 38% and 34% reported being “somewhat concerned.” With 95% confidence, and compared to a much larger sample, local university students reported an even stronger response to cost than the national survey when asked if they had “decided against buying a textbook because it was too expensive.”

National (2014)	n= 2,039	.628 - .672
Local university (2016)	n= 289	.732 - .828

Twenty four percent of respondents indicated “never” or “occasionally” buying or renting required textbooks for courses. 36% of respondents indicated they had made efforts to “make more money during the semester in order to afford the required textbook or other learning material.” Of these 36%, 84% reported taking on an additional job or adding additional work hours to their existing job. Students reported spending an average of \$325 in Spring semester 2016 on required textbooks, homework software access codes, and other required learning materials, in contrast to the \$1,000/year students are told to budget by the University.

Survey 2: Of Dean/Department head survey respondents (n=35, response rate=38%), nearly forty percent reported some level of discussion of the high cost of learning resources (textbooks, homework access codes, or other require learning resources) at the group or individual level within their college or department. Some college or department appeared to coordinate curricular material selection while others maintain an approach in which an individual faculty member selects course learning materials and navigates questions of cost on one’s own.

Respondents mentioned various strategies to reduce costs including: selecting alternative texts, publisher negotiation, raising student awareness regarding the cost of used copies and library reserves, and sharing costs of consumable studio materials. Those selecting alternative texts are: linking free online and library subscribed materials, adopting of open educational resources and open textbooks (such as OpenStax), and authoring original content to share freely with students. Others seek lower-cost academic society publications, negotiate with publishers for various print and electronic formats, or develop custom option. Respondents also mentioned broader concerns: University spending priorities, larger cost of tuition relative to required learning resources, and impacts on cost-saving measures on students and faculty authors.

### Discussion

Student responses to rising prices of required learning materials are resulting in unintended consequences for learning. Administration, teaching faculty and authors, students, libraries, and other university partners may benefit students by further exploring and adopt strategies which support learning for all students, provide permanent student access to faculty required course resources, and enhance faculty academic freedom and innovation in teaching.

### References

Florida Virtual Campus. (2012). *2012 Florida Student Textbook Survey*. Tallahassee, FL. Retrieved from: [http://www.openaccesstextbooks.org/%5Cpdf%5C2012\\_Florida\\_Student\\_Textbook\\_Survey.pdf](http://www.openaccesstextbooks.org/%5Cpdf%5C2012_Florida_Student_Textbook_Survey.pdf)

Hill, P. (2016). Students are spending less on textbooks but that’s not all good. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from: <http://www.chronicle.com/article/Students-Are-Spending-Less-on/235340>

U.S. GAO. (2005). *College Textbooks: Enhanced offerings appear to drive recent price increases*. Retrieved from: <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d05806.pdf>

U.S. GAO. (2013) *College Textbooks: Students have greater access to textbook information*. Retrieved from: <http://www.gao.gov/assets/660/655066.pdf>

U.S. Public Interest Research Group Education Fund and Student Public Interest Research Groups. (2014) *Fixing the Broken Textbook Market*. Washington, DC. Retrieved from: <http://www.uspirg.org/reports/usp/fixing-broken-textbook-market>

