



Exploring the Student Experience

Textbooks represent the fastest growing price tag for college students among many rising college expenses. In addition, the market for course materials has become more complicated with the rise of rentals, digital textbooks, online homework systems, and a diverse world of vendors from which to choose.

How are SUNY Oneonta students experiencing the impact of rising textbook costs and increasingly complicated decisions?

This poster describes the results of a student-led survey about undergraduate students' preferences and behaviors related to the attainment and use of textbooks and course materials. We explore how those results can inform our campus Open Educational Resources (OER) Initiative and other SUNY student success programs.

Student Expenditures on Course Materials

Overall, our students reported paying an average* of \$234 on course materials in spring 2021. When compared to a similar survey among Florida college students, SUNY Oneonta students reported spending less. Nearly half (43.8%) of the Florida students spent over \$300 on books in the reported period (fall 2018) while only 28% of SUNY Oneonta students spent over \$300 in the spring semester of 2021.

At first glance, this is good news for SUNY Oneonta students. Faculty textbook choices, programs like the OER Initiative, and the availability of library materials for classes may contribute to the lower costs our students pay for books. However, based on our students' textbook buying behaviors (described below), some of the cost savings may be a result of textbook or course avoidance.

*Average textbook cost calculated by taking the median integer of the cost category range (e.g., for the \$0-\$99 category, we used \$50 as an average). For the "Over \$500" category, we used \$550.

How much money have you spent on textbooks or other required materials for all your courses this semester?



Gathering Input across Campus

Data was collected through an online survey, which the student interns drafted based on a similar multi-year survey from the University of West Florida's Virtual Campus program. Our final survey instrument contained 21 questions about course loads, textbook costs, and students' decisions and preferences.

During two weeks in March 2021, the survey was deployed by email to 1,500 randomly selected SUNY Oneonta students, which represented 25% of the undergraduate student body. We received 169 responses for an 11.3% response rate. Not all respondents answered every question.

Respondents were evenly distributed across the four undergraduate years (freshmen through seniors), and in the spring 2021 semester, 92.5% were taking four or more courses (likely equivalent to full-time student status). Out of 46 possible majors, 28 majors are represented in our sample. The most majors of respondents were in Education (30%), Psychology (11.3%), and Biology (9.4%).

Textbook Buying Behaviors

Our students' educational decisions are affected by the cost of course materials. Due to the cost of textbooks, 45.6% say they have avoided registering for a specific course, 26.3% have dropped or withdrawn from a course, and 33.8% have chosen to take fewer courses as a student at SUNY Oneonta.

Well over half of our student respondents (61.9%) have chosen not to acquire a required textbook for a course in the past.

This rate of textbook avoidance is comparable to the 64.5% reported by the Florida survey. See the table below for our students' reasons for not getting required materials.

What were the reasons why you did not buy/rent the required textbooks? (select all that apply)	Response Count	Percent*
Instructor did not assign readings from the required textbooks	56	56.6%
I could not afford the required textbooks	45	45.5%
I found the textbook online and for free	45	45.5%
I borrowed textbooks from another student	26	26.3%
I don't usually do textbook reading assignments	23	23.2%
I used the library's resources	12	12.1%
I don't usually use the course materials	11	11.1%
Other	2	2.0%

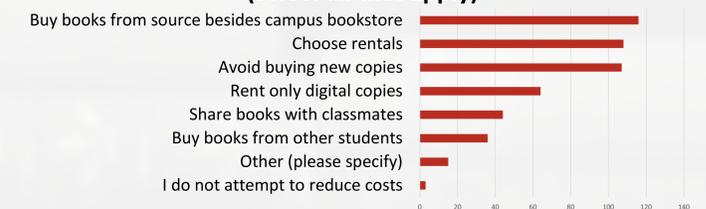
*Percent of respondents (N=99) reporting not getting a required book.

Cost Reduction and Study Strategies

"I do anything to get the cheapest version." – SUNY Oneonta student

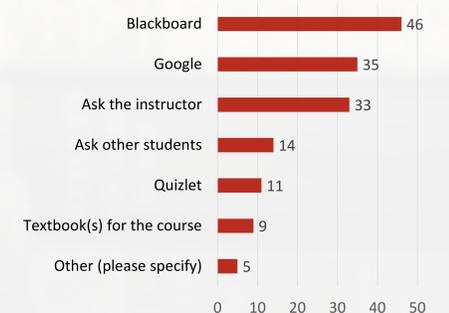
Beyond avoiding expensive courses or reducing their course load, our students are using many other strategies to reduce textbook costs. The top three ways that students reduce textbook costs are by buying books from another source besides the campus bookstore (69.0%), choosing rentals (64.3%), and avoiding buying new copies (63.7%).

How do you attempt to reduce the cost of your textbooks? (select all that apply)



Reflecting a growing trend in the textbook market, 90.6% of our students have rented textbooks before, and 46% report that they rent textbooks *more often* than purchasing them.

When you have a question about course content, what resource do you use most often (choose one)?



Help with course content

When students want to get help with course content, they go to online sources first, and then to their instructors and classmates. The most common place to get help was Blackboard, our campus learning management system (30.1%), then Google (22.9%) and the instructor (21.6%). Of seven possible answers, only 5.9% of respondents reported going to their course textbooks most often.

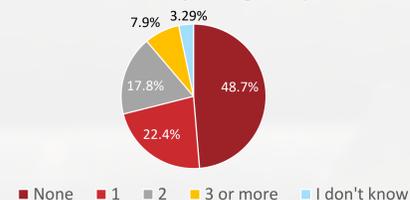
Learning from our Students

"I like when the professors are aware of more affordable textbook options." – SUNY Oneonta student

The insights from this survey will be used as a baseline as we continue to monitor students' perceptions and decisions. The results help the OER Initiative improve our program based on the student experience. We plan to work with future interns to craft student and faculty outreach with this data, and to make the survey a bi-annual event.

Use of Low-Cost Learning Materials

During this semester, how many of your courses provided your textbook/course materials to you for free (or only charged minimal printing costs)?



In this survey, 48% of students took at least one spring 2021 course that provided their materials for free or only charged a minimal printing fee.

This includes OER courses or courses where the instructor assigns items from the library or the instructor's own resources.

However, 48.7% of respondents had no low-cost courses.