



Balancing Affordability and Access

A Review of the Current Landscape of
Textbook Affordability Models

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ITHAKA S+R

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Executive summary

With funding from ECMC Foundation, Empire State University, in collaboration with Ithaka S+R, Monroe Community College, and SUNY Canton, undertook a comprehensive research study on textbook affordability. By studying best practices for providing high-quality and affordable resources, the three SUNY campuses plan to pilot new approaches for supplying free or low-cost educational resources to students, with a long-term goal of testing the viability of these options in the SUNY system.

In this report, we share findings from an environmental scan comprising a literature review, stakeholder interviews, and policy analysis.

For the environmental scan, we reviewed the literature associated with textbook and course material affordability, focusing on the history of these initiatives, their sustainability, as well as their impact on students and other institutional stakeholders. In tandem, we conducted 15 stakeholder interviews with publishers, library directors, bookstore executives, academic administrators, and education technology companies. During these interviews, stakeholders shared their perspectives on the course resource model landscape. We also conducted an analysis of federal and state policies relevant to the textbook affordability space, which can be found in Appendix A. Below is an analysis of these findings, including the origins and descriptions of existing textbook affordability models, implications for students and faculty, changes in course delivery models, and technology-related shifts in the publishing market and larger course materials ecosystem.

Key findings

- **Open Educational Resources (OER) are regarded as the primary solution for the textbook affordability problem.** Some stakeholders believe OER should replace other textbook alternatives, such as inclusive access, while others believe that OER should be used in tandem with traditional resources.

- **The increasing integration of AI into course materials needs further investigation.** Publishers and vendors are increasingly integrating generative AI into courseware platforms, and some instructors are using AI to create course materials. While some believe AI holds promise to create personalized educational experiences for students, others voiced concerns about the use of AI in teaching and learning in general. This dichotomy could benefit from serious investigation.
- **Faculty members are crucial in advancing textbook affordability models.** While changes to traditional textbook models impact how students access and engage with materials, meaningful progress at many institutions remains in the hands of faculty members. Since they typically select texts for the courses they teach, implementing textbook affordability models often requires additional time and capacity from faculty.
- **Digital formats are key to many affordability models.** Affordable textbook alternatives often rely on digital formats that can be distributed through learning management systems. This approach increases access to required materials for the duration of the class. However, students may lose access to those course materials at the conclusion of the term.
- **The increasing usage of digital textbooks is exacerbating the digital divide for US students.** Assumptions persist that all students have access to Wi-Fi and that all faculty have the requisite skills to navigate these materials. In reality, both students and faculty may struggle with basic digital literacy and reliable internet access.
- **Stakeholders have different perceptions on the impact of textbook affordability models.** While some believe that current models have driven down prices for students, others think models such as Inclusive and Equitable Access remove students' agency in how they purchase their course materials.
- **The delivery of digital course materials is inefficient.** Different stakeholders within the supply chain for digital course materials use different software and internal systems. This means that publishers, distributors, and bookstores are all using their own

technologies, which makes the passing of digital course materials from one stakeholder to the next challenging.

- **Digital courseware provides data on student usage but may not offer sufficient privacy safeguards.** Digital courseware often includes interactive and multi-modal features, increased accessibility options for students, and built-in analytics that allow educators to track student engagement with assigned materials. While student usage data may be useful information for publishers and faculty, it is imperative to have greater transparency in how this student data is used and protected.

Introduction

Rising costs for students in colleges and universities across the United States have long been an issue. The average undergraduate annual tuition at public four-year colleges has increased more than 1,000 percent since 1977.¹ Closely linked with rising tuition costs is the rising cost of textbooks and course materials, which according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, increased by 88 percent between 2006 and 2016.² In 2025, College Board estimated that students at both public four-year institutions, and private nonprofit four-year institutions spent around \$330 on course materials on average as well as an additional \$1,000 or more on other academic supplies.³ Some students purchase their textbooks outright, some rent, others use old editions; other students access materials through their library's course reserves collection or find free versions online. And while research shows that there has been a 40-50 percent decline in average student spending on course materials over

¹ J. Jacob Jenkins, Luis A. Sánchez, Megan A. K. Schraedley, Jaime Hannans, Nitzan Navick, and Jade Young, "Textbook Broke: Textbook Affordability as a Social Justice Issue," *Journal of Interactive Media in Education* 2020, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.5334/jime.549>, 1.

² "College Tuition and Fees Increase 63 Percent since January 2006," Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed October 27, 2025, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2016/college-tuition-and-fees-increase-63-percent-since-january-2006.htm>.

³ Jennifer Ma, Matea Pender, and Xiaowen Hu, "Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2025," *College Board*, 2025, https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/Trends-in-College-Pricing-and-Student-Aid-2025-final_1.pdf.

the last decade, the cost still poses a challenge for many students.⁴ One recent study found that as many as two-thirds of students chose not to purchase their required course materials.⁵ In other instances, students simply drop the course altogether if they can't afford the textbooks.⁶ Affording college, including living expenses, tuition, and course materials, can be particularly challenging for low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color.⁷

According to the existing literature, many textbook affordability programs stem from frustrations that staff, faculty, and students have with traditional models of course materials acquisition and their institution's bookstore.⁸ Fewer college bookstores run independently than in the past, and many are operated by an outside party—often either Barnes & Noble Education or Follett Higher Education.⁹ In 2020, of the roughly 4,000 college bookstores in the United States, only half were operated by their own institution.¹⁰ At the same time, many bookstores were rebranded as campus stores, featuring school-related merchandise, where course resources are secondary.¹¹ As students have increasingly found cheaper textbooks or pirated copies of their materials online, campus bookstores and textbook publishers have searched for alternatives to make up for lost income.¹²

In 2016, the US Department of Education amended the Cash Management regulation, allowing schools to automatically charge

⁴ "Trends in Student Spending on Course Materials: 2025 Research," AAP Student Resources 2025 V15, Association of American Publishers, 2025, <https://vimeo.com/1109763622>.

⁵ Sarah LeMire, "OER Librarianship: Examining OER Librarian Work, Motivations, and Origin Stories," *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 25, no. 1 (2025): 67–86.

⁶ Aline Soules, "Textbooks and the Library Collection," *Collection Management* 44 (2019): 221–231, doi:10.1080/01462679.2019.1606747.

⁷ Zara T. Wilkinson, "The Prevalence of Textbook Affordability and OER Initiatives at ARL Libraries," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 50, no. 4 (2024): 102884, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2024.102884>, 3.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Katya Schwenk, "How Wall Street Broke The College Bookstore," *The Lever*, September 10, 2025, <https://www.levernews.com/how-wall-street-broke-the-college-bookstore/>.

¹⁰ Morales Carrera and David Paul, "How the College Bookstore Lost Its Groove," *Journal of Student Affairs*, New York University 18 (2022), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1354074>, 51.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Katya Schwenk, "How Wall Street Broke The College Bookstore," *The Lever*, September 10, 2025, <https://www.levernews.com/how-wall-street-broke-the-college-bookstore/>.

students for course materials through fees, often without requiring students' permission to add the additional fee.¹³ The regulation amendment led to the normalization of automated textbook billing or inclusive or equitable access programs.¹⁴ Colleges and universities assign students a fee for access to all their required course materials. Programs like this typically are administered through the college store. And the programs do save students significant money if they intend to purchase all their materials through their college store.¹⁵ While students are allowed to opt out, the regulation does not define policies for doing so. As a result, institutions themselves set the policies, and some make it difficult for students to opt out. In response, critics argue that these programs have removed agency from the student as a consumer trying to navigate their college experience in a financially responsible way.¹⁶ Some have also referred to these billing programs as “predatory” toward students, citing concerns that publisher revenue is prioritized over student affordability.¹⁷

Another barrier to affordability relates to online homework systems requiring students to purchase an access code to complete their assignments, and depending on the instructor, take their assessments.¹⁸ As the used and rental markets eroded revenue from new print sales, publishers pursued a strategy centered on digital delivery, selling online texts through access codes that expire at the end of the term. This in

¹³ Libby DeBlasio Webster, “Changes to the Cash Management Regulations: Diminishing Students' Choice over How to Obtain Their Textbooks and How Much to Spend,” Postsecondary Equity & Economics Research Project, a joint initiative of George Washington University, Columbia University, and Student Defense, April 2023. <https://docs.defendstudents.org/peer/2023-4-3-PEER>Returns-Textbooks-FNL.pdf>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Katya Schwenk, “How Wall Street Broke The College Bookstore,” *The Lever*, September 10, 2025, <https://www.levernews.com/how-wall-street-broke-the-college-bookstore/>.

¹⁶ For more on this topic see: Elizabeth Spica, “Inclusive Access: A Multi-Institutional Study of Academic Outcomes from A Statewide Community College Automatic Billing eTextbook Pilot,” *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 47, no. 3 (2023): 197–216, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2021.1990161>; Amy Hofer, “Thinking Critically About Inclusive and Equitable Access Programs,” *Openoregon.Org*, June 28, 2024, <https://openoregon.org/thinking-critically-about-inclusive-and-equitable-access-programs/>.

¹⁷ Katya Schwenk, “How Wall Street Broke The College Bookstore,” *The Lever*, September 10, 2025, <https://www.levernews.com/how-wall-street-broke-the-college-bookstore/>.

¹⁸ Virginia Clinton-Lisell and Alison E. Kelly, “The Cost of Doing Homework: Online Homework Systems with Access Codes from a Social Justice Perspective,” *International Journal of Technology in Education and Science* 8, no. 2 (2024): 296–310, <https://doi.org/10.46328/ijtes.547>.

effect means that a whole class of course materials cannot be purchased through the used textbook marketplace, restoring recurring revenue for publishers.¹⁹ Students then have no way to opt out of buying the textbook if they can only fulfill assignments through an access code. One student cited in a 2026 PIRGs Report explained that “While I have never skipped buying an access code, it’s not because it was easy to afford, but rather out of fear of failing the course.”²⁰

In more recent years, libraries have helped to spur the growth of open educational resources (OER) as another alternative to the textbook.

While libraries cannot provide online access codes, they have historically served as a useful resource for students seeking affordable options. Many offer reserve programs, which help to provide students with short-term access to both physical books and electronic resources.²¹ Additionally, in more recent years, libraries have helped to spur the growth of open educational resources (OER) as another alternative to the textbook. These have helped to significantly decrease the financial burden on students and their families.²² Librarians have been on the front line of this transition, working with faculty members and students to make materials more easily accessible and affordable. Library Journal’s Textbook Affordability Survey highlights that textbook affordability is a major concern for both students and institutions—if students do not have their

¹⁹ Stephanie Lee, Ju-Ho Lee, and Youngsik Jeong, “The Effects of Digital Textbooks on Students’ Academic Performance, Academic Interest, and Learning Skills,” *Journal of Marketing Research* 60, no. 4 (2023): 792–811; Eun-Ok Baek and James Monaghan, “Journey to Textbook Affordability: An Investigation of Students’ use of eTextbooks at Multiple Campuses,” *International Review of Research in Open Und Distributed Learning* 14, no. 3 (2013): 1–26.

²⁰ Ibid, 6.

²¹ Mitchell Scott and Rachel Scott, “A Comprehensive Study of Library-Led Textbook Affordability Initiatives in the United States,” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 25, no. 3 (2025): 471–507; Sarah LeMire, “OER Librarianship: Examining OER Librarian Work, Motivations, and Origin Stories,” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 25, no. 1 (2025): 67–86.

²² Nicole Allen, “\$1 Billion in Savings through Open Educational Resources,” *SPARC*, October 12, 2018, <https://sparcopen.org/news/2018/1-billion-in-savings-through-open-educational-resources/>.

necessary materials, they are more likely to underperform, reflecting poorly on the school the student attends.²³

Existing affordability models

To address textbook affordability, higher education institutions, their libraries, and other units on campus have introduced a number of initiatives. These include course reserves, open educational resources (OER), inclusive access, and equitable access programs.

Course reserves

Housed in campus libraries, course reserves provide short-term access to textbooks and other required readings. Faculty work with librarians to make sure the resources for their classes are available, allowing students to borrow the necessary materials. In 2015, nearly 80 percent of Association of Research Libraries (ARL) members provided a reserves service, including a dedicated reserves website or instructions for submitting requests for reserves.²⁴

However, reserve services come with limitations and are not designed to provide texts at scale. As Sarah LeMire describes, “students must share textbook access with classmates, fines can be steep for financially disadvantaged students, and students can only keep the textbooks for a short period of time.”²⁵ For example, at Columbia University, course materials on reserve are generally available for only four hours at a time, while at CUNY Hunter College, physical course reserves can be checked

²³ Lisa Peet, “LJ Textbook Affordability Survey,” *Library Journal* 144, no. 6 (2019): 14. ABI/INFORM Collection; Research Library (2247789405).

²⁴ Osman Celik and Roxanne M. Peck, “The Future of Textbooks and Course Reserves in Academic Libraries: An Evolving Role and Emerging Opportunity,” In *Where Do We Go From Here?: Charleston Conference Proceedings, 2015*, edited by Beth R. Bernhardt, Leah H. Hinds, and Katina P. Strauch (Purdue University Press, 2016), 322–26, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv15wxr5j.56>.

²⁵ Sarah LeMire, “OER Librarianship: Examining OER Librarian Work, Motivations, and Origin Stories,” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 25, no. 1 (2025): 67–86, 68.

out for two hours for in-library use only.²⁶ Additionally, as LeMire goes on to explain, libraries are facing the same textbook price increases as the students, so it is becoming increasingly more difficult for them to provide the materials to everyone who needs them.²⁷ As Osman Celik and Roxanne Peck report, it is not feasible or practical for libraries to purchase a single textbook copy for each student. At UCLA, for instance, Powell Library's guidelines in 2015 allowed for the purchase of one textbook copy for classes with under 50 students and five copies for classes with 300 or more.²⁸

In more recent years, some librarians have created programs for textbook alternatives like OER, while others continue to budget for traditional course reserves and supplement with OER materials. In a study conducted by Mitchell Scott and Rachel Scott, one interviewee emphasized that "course reserves are dying."²⁹ Other interviewees indicated that course reserves are integral to their new textbook affordability programs, with one participant explaining that their approach is "a proactive course reserve, which builds on existing library infrastructure and services to embrace textbook affordability at a larger scale."³⁰

The rise of ebooks and digital courseware impacts library course reserve programs. Libraries are typically unable to lend digital courseware from major textbook publishers because licensing agreements and digital copyright management prohibit versions that can be lent to multiple students.³¹ This reduces options for students who are seeking alternative access methods. While course reserves provide some benefit, there are

²⁶ Adina Mulliken, "LibGuides: Course Reserves at Hunter College Libraries: Welcome," Hunter College Libraries, accessed August 6, 2026, <https://libguides.library.hunter.cuny.edu/eres/welcome>;

"Course Reserves Policies," Columbia University Libraries, accessed August 6, 2026, <https://library.columbia.edu/services/reserves/policies.html>.

²⁷ Sarah LeMire, "OER Librarianship: Examining OER Librarian Work, Motivations, and Origin Stories," *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 25, no. 1 (2025): 67–86, 68.

²⁸ Osman Celik and Roxanne M. Peck, "The Future of Textbooks and Course Reserves in Academic Libraries: An Evolving Role and Emerging Opportunity," In *Where Do We Go From Here?*, edited by Beth R. Bernhardt, Leah H. Hinds, and Katina P. Strauch (Purdue University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv15wxr5j.324>.

²⁹ Mitchell Scott and Rachel Scott, "A Comprehensive Study of Library-Led Textbook Affordability Initiatives in the United States," *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 25, no. 3 (2025): 471–507, 488.

³⁰ Ibid, 490.

³¹ "Course Reserves: About Course Reserves," Wayne State University Library System. June 24, 2026, <https://guides.lib.wayne.edu/reserves>

limitations to the extent to which they can meet student needs. Given the constraints that govern how and when materials can be used as well as budgetary barriers to scaling reserve programs, librarians are seeking alternative solutions.

OER

Open Educational Resources are teaching, learning, and research materials that either reside in the public domain or are made available under an open license allowing free use, adaptation, and redistribution without cost (or with minimal restrictions).³² UNESCO's 2019 Recommendation of Open Educational Resources describes them as teaching and learning materials, in any medium—digital or physical—that invite “free use, adaptation, and redistribution by others.”³³

Awareness and adoption of OER among faculty remain uneven.

Open Educational Resources are one of the most visible alternatives to commercial textbooks. Yet, as research from Bay View Analytics demonstrates, awareness and adoption of OER among faculty remain uneven.³⁴ In their long-running *Digital Faculty Survey* series, they report that while a majority of instructors express support for textbook affordability and student access, fewer than half have ever adopted an openly licensed textbook. Their 2023 report, for example, found that only 39 percent of faculty were aware of OER, and just 22 percent reported having adopted OER materials in their courses. Earlier studies revealed similar patterns: in a 2016 Cengage survey, 39 percent of faculty had never heard of OER, 36 percent knew of them but had not reviewed or used them, 10 percent had reviewed OER but not adopted them, and only 11 percent were active users. A library director interviewee shared that

³² “Draft Recommendation on Open Educational Resources,” UNESCO Digital Library, accessed October 27, 2025,

<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000370936.locale=en>.

³³ “Recommendation on Open Educational Resources (OER) - Legal Affairs,” UNESCO, accessed October 27, 2025, <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/recommendation-open-educational-resources-oer>.

³⁴ Julia E. Seaman and Jeff Seaman, “Digitally Established: Educational Resources in U.S. Higher Education,” *Bay View Analytics*, September 2023, <https://www.bayviewanalytics.com/reports/digitallyestablished-2023.pdf>.

“[There was] a lot of resistance from faculty in 2020 but [we helped] people create OER in niche areas. The benefits to the students outweighed the crankiness of a few people.”

The barriers to OER adoption are rarely philosophical. Most faculty who know about OER express favorable attitudes toward them.³⁵ The challenges, rather, stem from lack of time and institutional support to implement OER. Developing, adapting, or curating open materials requires time—an increasingly scarce resource in academic life. Faculty are caught in a paradox: they believe in openness but are constrained by workloads that reward research productivity far more than pedagogical innovation. “I don’t hear as much from university administration about providing affordable materials to our students or the topic of OER as much as I do from the campus level administration. On the one hand that sounds reasonable, and on the other hand, sometimes for things to happen it has to come from the top,” shared a university librarian.

Faculty are caught in a paradox: they believe in openness but are constrained by workloads that reward research productivity far more than pedagogical innovation.

Recognizing this tension, many colleges and university systems have introduced mini-grants, stipends, and release time to encourage faculty to adopt or author OER. For example, a higher education consortium stakeholder shared, “We have an initiative around helping faculty identify and adopt OER materials for their courses. It’s a mini-grant program where a faculty member can work with trained librarians on how to find materials to meet their course objectives. They get a small stipend to [participate]. These small interventions are helping to move the needle. They represent a subtle shift in academic culture—from one that prizes individual ownership of intellectual work toward one that values shared creation and stewardship of knowledge.

CUNY Kingsborough Community College professors Dawn Levy and Dorina Tila explain that creating OER materials also shows that an instructor cares for their students’ well-being, financially and otherwise, which can

³⁵ Julia E. Seaman and Jeff Seaman, “Opening the Textbook: Educational Resources in U.S. Higher Education, 2017,” *Babson Survey Research*, 2017, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED582411>.

lead to actively engaged students who perform better in class.³⁶ When faculty assign OER for their classes, students save money that can cover other costs, like tuition or personal expenses and this showcases teacher empathy which can improve student motivation in their learning.³⁷ Students, however, are likely not choosing classes based on the types of materials they require: a 2018 Achieving the Dream report found that students tend to learn that a course is using OER only after enrolling.³⁸

In 2025, Ithaka S+R found that the impact of OER on minority-serving institutions, students of color, rural students, and students with disabilities is understudied. However, the community college faculty and staff interviewed for that project were “focused on ensuring that materials they adopt, adapt, and create are representative of their diverse and often non-traditional student populations, as well as a dedication to their campuses’ stewardship of place in their local communities.”³⁹

The same report found concerns about the financial sustainability of OER. While there is not a standard model for creating and sustaining OER, many are supported through state funding.⁴⁰ This leaves some critics skeptical about the long-term viability of OER. As one education technology company interviewee said, “You pay instructors to move to OER, they move to OER, and then two or three years later they move away from it. [...] There’s a lot of excitement when the program rolls out, but then someone’s got to maintain this stuff over time [...] so the programs stagnate and then eventually people start to switch back.” However, no published research documents systematic reversion to commercial materials after OER adoption funding lapses. Oregon’s grant cohorts show student savings that continue compounding a decade past the funding

³⁶ Dawn Levy and Dorina Tila, “An Overlooked Benefit of OER: Showing Students We Care,” *International Journal of Research in Education Humanities and Commerce*, 201.

³⁷ Jenifer Ross et al., “Instructor and Student Perceptions of Teacher Empathy in Higher Education,” *College Teaching* 71, no. 1 (2023): 28–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2022.2049673>.

³⁸ Rebecca Griffiths, Shari Gardner, Patrick Lundh, Linda Shear, Alexandra Ball, Jessica Mislevy, Shuai Wang, Donna Desrochers, and Richard Staisloff, “Participant Experiences and Financial Impacts: Findings from Year 2 of Achieving the Dream’s OER Degree Initiative,” *SRI International*, 2018, https://achievingthedream.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/participant_experiences_and_financial_impacts_oer_2018.pdf.

³⁹ Ioana Hulbert et al., “Charting the Course: Case Studies in OER Sustainability,” *Ithaka S+R*, January 22, 2025, <https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/charting-the-course/>, 12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 3.

period, a pattern inconsistent with widespread reversion.⁴¹ This evidence, however, comes almost entirely from OER programs reporting on their own outcomes; independent longitudinal tracking does not exist.

Stakeholders also expressed concern about the quality of OER materials, compared to textbooks that undergo a rigorous editorial process. However, students at times find OER materials to be higher quality than traditional textbooks.⁴² The UC Davis Library provides a comprehensive checklist of criteria to review when evaluating OER. It includes ensuring that the material's content is comprehensive, accurate, still relevant, clear to understand, consistent, organized, culturally relevant, and free of grammatical errors. The materials also should be free of significant interface issues, be accessible to readers, and the materials should be modular and easy to parse through.⁴³ OpenStax explains how they prepare their book content in three overarching phases. Phase one includes preparation and planning, relying on a series of interviews and surveys of faculty and students to help learn more about student challenges and any emerging trends or research in the field. During this phase, OpenStax staff also establish a strong relationship with expert authors from a variety of backgrounds. Editorial development happens in phase two and includes creating a detailed textbook outline, checking for originality, editing, reviewing, and revision. During phase three, OpenStax finalizes production; this includes rendering the art, writing alternative text, checking for accuracy, and final copy editing. Even once the book is published, OpenStax staff also continue to make updates when necessary.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Amy Hofer, "Continuing Savings from Past OER Grants (Fourth Report)," Open Oregon Educational Resources, September 5, 2025, <https://openoregon.org/continuing-savings-4/>.

⁴² Scott Woodward et al., "Student Voice in Textbook Evaluation: Comparing Open and Restricted Textbooks," *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning* 18, no. 6 (2017): 150–63.

⁴³ "Tips for Evaluating OER - Open Educational Resources (OER) - Research Guides at UC Davis," UC Davis, accessed December 5, 2025, <https://guides.library.ucdavis.edu/open-educational-resources/evaluate>.

⁴⁴ "Free Textbooks Online with No Catch," Rice University, OpenStax, accessed December 5, 2025, <https://openstax.org/>.

Inclusive access

Inclusive access, or automatic textbook billing, was also designed to help with affordability. Under this model, the cost of digital textbooks and other course materials are embedded directly into the student's tuition and fees.⁴⁵ Typically managed through college bookstores, these programs were created with the intention of saving students money.⁴⁶ Inclusive access has also proven to be a more sustainable distribution model for publishers, whose profits have substantially declined since 2016 with the rise in OER and other alternative methods.⁴⁷

Inclusive access programs have faced criticism, however, particularly because automatic textbook billing programs can lack transparency. Kaitlin Vitez found that “Students may struggle to understand the true costs and alternatives. Opt-out processes are sometimes difficult to navigate and not clearly communicated to students, as students are automatically enrolled and can only opt out during a specific time frame that is not always efficiently communicated.”⁴⁸ As Amy Hofer has articulated, inclusive, as well as equitable, access programs do save students money, but calculating savings depends on the context. “This lack of transparency creates an information asymmetry that further challenges student autonomy and informed decision-making.”⁴⁹ Students do save money with inclusive access, as the cost through the program is

⁴⁵ “The Facts on Affordable Access Textbooks,” InclusiveAccess.Org, accessed October 27, 2025, <https://www.inclusiveaccess.org>.

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Spica, “Inclusive Access: A Multi-Institutional Study of Academic Outcomes from A Statewide Community College Automatic Billing eTextbook Pilot,” *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 47, no. 3 (2023): 197–216, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2021.1990161>, 200.

⁴⁷ Ibid; Bob Carbaugh, “The Decline of College Textbook Publishing: Cengage Learning and McGraw-Hill,” *The American Economist* 65, no. 2 (2020): 284–99, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0569434520936621>; “NACS Report: Student Spending on Course Materials Continues to Decline,” June 25, 2020, <https://www.nacs.org/copy-of-shoulders-1>; Kaitlyn Vitez, “Automatic Textbooks Billing: An Offer Students Can’t Refuse?” US PIRG Education Fund, March 9, 2020, <https://pirg.org/edfund/resources/automatic-textbooks-billing-an-offer-students-cant-refuse/>.

⁴⁸ Kaitlyn Vitez, “Automatic Textbooks Billing: An Offer Students Can’t Refuse?” US PIRG Education Fund, March 9, 2020, <https://pirg.org/edfund/resources/automatic-textbooks-billing-an-offer-students-cant-refuse/>.

⁴⁹ Amy Hofer, “Thinking Critically About Inclusive and Equitable Access Programs,” *Openoregon.Org*, June 28, 2024, <https://openoregon.org/thinking-critically-about-inclusive-and-equitable-access-programs/>.

less than what a student would pay on their own.⁵⁰ Colleges and universities negotiate with publishers for the student discount, in a process that Spica has written, “removes the student consumer from the equation.”⁵¹ When bookstores advertise how much money students have saved using an inclusive access program, they are comparing the cost of a brand-new print textbook to the e-books provided. However, students are required to pay the fee, shutting down opportunities for them to save money by sharing access with classmates, buying used textbooks, or possibly finding alternative (or pirated) options, online.⁵²

Among the stakeholders we interviewed, there were opposing views on the benefits and drawbacks of the inclusive access model. Stakeholders who see it as a net positive spoke about how it drives down course material costs and allows students to have those materials in hand at the start of the semester. One educational technology company interviewee said, “Textbook pricing had gotten out of hand [...and] with inclusive access the prices went down, down, down and it just took off like wildfire.” They went on to say, “Faculty were happy [with inclusive access] because students got [materials] on day one. Publishers were happy because they had higher sell through. [And bookstores] embraced it.” Sell-through rate, as referenced by this stakeholder, refers to the percentage of inventory sold during a given period. With inclusive access, the cost per textbook is less, but more students buy the books and fewer return them, leading to higher profitability. A publisher interviewee noted that, “[Sales] reps like [inclusive access] because it improves sell through, so they would be always happy to talk to instructors about the benefits of it and getting them to add their courses to [the program].[...] If you look at [pricing graphs] it’s shocking how far the prices have dropped over the past few years because of things like inclusive access.”

On the other side, stakeholders who perceive inclusive access negatively believe it hinders student choice and ultimately does not lower costs for students as much as hoped. A higher education consortium interviewee

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Elizabeth Spica, “Inclusive Access: A Multi-Institutional Study of Academic Outcomes from A Statewide Community College Automatic Billing eTextbook Pilot,” *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 47, no. 3 (2023): 197–216, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2021.1990161>, 200.

⁵² Amy Hofer, “Thinking Critically About Inclusive and Equitable Access Programs,” *Openoregon.Org*, June 28, 2024, <https://openoregon.org/thinking-critically-about-inclusive-and-equitable-access-programs/>.

shared, “I would say that forced purchase programs [like inclusive access] don’t have the goal of reducing costs for students. They have the goal of extracting data from students and the goal of forcing students to purchase.” This stakeholder went on to share that in contracts between institutions and the third party acting as the purveyor of required course materials (often the bookstore), there are sometimes stipulations prohibiting faculty from promoting alternative purchase options to students: “If a professor puts in their syllabus or expresses in class you can go to the used bookstore down the street and get a less expensive copy of this, the instructor is violating the agreement between the institution and the bookstore.”

Equitable access

Equitable access programs seek to improve affordability and ensure consistent access to course materials. These programs provide enrolled students with access to required textbooks and learning resources by the first day of class through a flat-rate fee added to tuition or as a separate course materials charge. While implementation models vary, the objective remains consistent: to reduce cost barriers and ensure that all students begin each term with the materials needed to participate fully in their coursework.⁵³ While equitable access has some similarities to inclusive access, an important distinction is that the flat-rate fee is typically institution-wide and ideally covers all course materials for the term, whereas inclusive access fees are specific to a department or course.

The University of California, Davis (UC Davis) has a robust equitable access program.⁵⁴ Operated through the UC Davis Stores, this program charges undergraduates a flat rate of approximately \$169 per term for access to all required course materials (the cost is \$199 for Graduate School of Management). Digital resources are delivered before or on the first day of class, and students who prefer print materials can obtain physical copies from the campus store. According to UC Davis, this model simplifies the purchasing process and standardizes costs across courses

⁵³ “Get the Facts About Equitable Access Programs,” Inclusive Access, <https://www.inclusiveaccess.org/equitable-access>.

⁵⁴ “Equitable Access,” UC Davis, accessed October 27, 2025, <https://ucdavisstores.com/EquitableAccess>.

while maintaining an opt-out provision for students who choose to obtain materials independently.

Other institutions have implemented similar frameworks through partnerships with educational technology providers. BibliU's *Universal Learning* platform, for instance, applies an equitable access model that integrates digital textbooks across entire institutions. Participating campuses such as Jackson College and Iowa Western Community College include the cost of materials as part of tuition, ensuring digital delivery of content through their learning management systems.⁵⁵

A primary criticism of this model is that since the cost of textbooks and course materials vary by discipline, majors with more affordable materials are essentially subsidizing the cost of materials in majors with more expensive materials, since all students pay the same price. During our stakeholder interviews, several interviewees voiced concerns over this dynamic. One person said, “at its core [this program] is pushing the liberal arts students to pay for STEM materials. Chem, etc, costs more, but everyone is paying the same fees.” Another stakeholder shared that students in some majors may be able to find cheaper options than the equitable access fee for their required materials on the secondary market. “The difference in the cost of textbooks by major is insane...In English, they don't update literature very often so it's all used books..., whereas in some of the sciences they update the text all of the time.”

On the publisher end, producing course materials in different disciplines costs significantly different amounts as well. “The average cost to create a freshman/sophomore science book is much different than the average cost to create a freshman/sophomore humanities title, sometimes in multipliers of four or five times the money,” offered one stakeholder. All of these factors influence the difference in textbook cost by discipline, and when students are paying the same fee, regardless of discipline, it is a concern for many stakeholders.

⁵⁵ “BibliU Partners with Iowa Western Community College to Implement Universal Learning, Serving Over 5,000 Students,” *BibliU*, August 2, 2023, <https://bibliu.com/in-the-news/bibliu-partners-with-iowa-western-community-college-to-implement-universal-learning-serving-over-5-000-students>.

A Comparison

Dimension	Equitable Access	Inclusive Access
Scope / Participation	Institution-wide or broad, ideally all courses	Select courses or departments
Cost Structure	One flat or bundled rate, shared among all	Course-specific pricing, negotiated for each title
Access Guarantee	All students get materials on day one	Only in participating courses; others follow legacy paths
Equity Intent	Seeks systemic fairness; removes disparity by design	Seeks affordability, but leaves room for variation and partial coverage
Opt-Out / Choice	Institution must allow opt-out, but default is inclusion	Opt-out usually per course; choice exists but sometimes constrained
Risk / Subsidy Effects	Students of low-textbook-cost majors may subsidize high-cost majors	Risk of unequal access across disciplines; students in non-opted courses are left out
Implementation Complexity	Requires strong institutional coordination, library partnerships, durable licensing	Easier to pilot at course-level, less sweeping institutional change

E-Textbooks

Some academic libraries have begun providing electronic versions of required textbooks. At Louisiana State University their library acquires course-assigned titles as library-licensed e-books and provides them to students at no cost; a parallel effort at the University of New Orleans coordinated through the statewide academic library consortium LOUIS follows a similar model.⁵⁶ In a Charleston Conference paper on library e-book programs, Comeaux, Li, and Pavy report survey findings from Library Journal and EBSCO on why faculty hesitate to assign library-licensed e-books. Twenty-two percent identified the library's not having purchased the assigned title as the leading obstacle, 17 percent believed their

⁵⁶ Mitchell Scott and Rachel Scott, "A Comprehensive Study of Library-Led Textbook Affordability Initiatives in the United States," *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 25, no. 3 (2025): 471–507, 472.

students preferred print, and 15 percent said there was no easy way to add library materials to a course management system.⁵⁷ Throughout the literature, we found the overall communication between librarians, faculty, and the bookstore to be a recurring obstacle to the use of library-provided e-textbooks. As Dave Comeaux, Kara Kroes Li, and Jeanne A. Pavy note, “Libraries can promote affordability by simply informing faculty that the library owns an e-book version of an assigned course text...and can more proactively engage faculty during the course selection process.”⁵⁸

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There are also coordination problems. As Scott and Scott note, “even though faculty are given deadlines for submitting required textbooks to the bookstore for an upcoming semester, lists frequently become complete only as the semester approaches; this is problematic for librarians whose complex workflows rely on these lists.”⁵⁹ In a survey of librarians, they found that 25 percent receive the requested textbook lists from faculty only one to two weeks ahead of the start of the semester, and 4 percent receive it after the semester has already begun.⁶⁰ A study from the Sherrod Library at East Tennessee State University on their e-textbook program found that 44 percent of instructors had never consulted the library catalog to see if access was already available at the library, and 44 percent also were not aware e-textbooks could be purchased through the library.⁶¹ In a study on the University of South Florida’s E-books for the Classroom program, researchers revealed that faculty may not realize that

⁵⁷ Dave Comeaux et al., “Getting E-Books into Courses: How Libraries Can Partner with Faculty to Ease the Textbook Affordability Crisis,” *Charleston Library Conference*, October 31, 2019, <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/charleston/2018/collectiondevelopment/13>, 138.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 139.

⁵⁹ Mitchell Scott and Rachel Scott, “A Comprehensive Study of Library-Led Textbook Affordability Initiatives in the United States,” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 25, no. 3 (2025): 471–507, 480.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 481.

⁶¹ Travis Clamon et al., “Addressing Textbook Affordability with Institutional Licensed E-Textbooks,” *ETSU Faculty Works*, January 1, 2022, <https://dc.etsu.edu/etsu-works/19289>.

an e-book offered through the library is available as a single-user model, or that publishers still do not make all textbooks available as e-books.⁶² The ideal e-textbook allows an unlimited number of concurrent users, as well as few restrictions in downloading, copying, or printing materials.⁶³ Platforms such as ProQuest's Ebook Central, or EBSCO eBooks generally offer concurrent user e-textbooks, but also offer one or three user access.⁶⁴ According to EBSCO Connect, the most affordable access model for libraries is their single-user model.⁶⁵

⁶² Jason Boczar and Laura Pascual, "E-Books for the Classroom and Open Access Textbooks: Two Ways to Help Students Save Money on Textbooks," *The Serials Librarian* 72, no. 1-4 (2017): 95-101, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0361526X.2017.1309830>.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ "EBSCOhost Collection Manager: Choosing an Access Model," EBSCO, accessed August 7, 2026, https://connect.ebsco.com/s/article/EBSCOhost-Collection-Manager-Choosing-an-Access-Model?language=en_US.

Implications for students and faculty

A number of parties—including faculty, students, librarians, university administrators, bookstores, publishing companies, authors, and policy makers—hold stakes in these various textbook affordability programs. In this section, we focus on considerations of these textbook affordability programs for students and faculty members specifically.

Students

As higher education becomes less affordable generally, alternative course materials can benefit students. The cost of course materials can impact how well students perform in classes each semester. An increasing number of studies show that students are less likely to withdraw from or fail classes if instructors provide access to course materials.⁶⁶ N.B. Colvard found a positive correlation between the increased use of OER, and higher grades, particularly for low-income, first-generation, or part-time students, as well as students from minority groups.⁶⁷ In another study, Jenkins shows that nearly 31 percent of Latinx students avoided taking a class due to textbook costs in comparison to nearly 23 percent of White students. Similarly, he found that 61 percent of first-generation students did not buy a textbook due to costs and felt that it hurt their performance, in comparison to 49 percent of non-first-generation students.

The cost of course materials can impact how well students perform in classes each semester.

⁶⁶ Katie Bishop et al., “Assessment of a Textbook Affordability Initiative: A Framework for Measuring the Impact on Student Enrollment and Retention Outcomes,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 51, no. 3 (2025): 103025, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2025.103025>.

⁶⁷ Nicholas B. Colvard et al., “The Impact of Open Educational Resources on Various Student Success Metrics,” *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 30, no. 2 (2018): 262–76.

Importantly, students who do not purchase textbooks due to cost are often navigating financial challenges in other areas as well. “Fixing the Broken Textbook Market” surveyed more than 5,000 college students in 2020, finding that the number of students who reported not buying access codes for their assignments rose from 17 percent in the 2019 cycle of the survey to 21 percent during the pandemic.⁶⁸ In a 2024 study focusing on access codes from a social justice perspective, Virginia Clinton-Lisell and Alison E. Kelly found that of the nearly 80 percent of students they surveyed for their project, 29.4 percent of students surveyed reported that their grade was hurt because they could not afford an access code.⁶⁹ The “Fixing the Broken Textbook Market” study also found that 82 percent of students who had reported they missed meals during the pandemic also reported not buying textbooks due to the price.⁷⁰ Many researchers argue that students already struggling financially should not have the added stress of paying for their course materials.⁷¹

A recent research study of over 700 students at a Hispanic-Serving Institution to examine barriers to textbook affordability showed students dependent on financial aid experience higher anxiety around coursebook acquisitions. In the study,⁷² ninety-one percent of low-income students reported feeling stress due to textbook costs as compared to only 84 percent of those who were not dependent on financial aid. Additionally, 83 percent of students dependent on financial aid reported they did not have textbooks on the first day of classes because of costs as compared to 74 percent of their peers. Being dependent on financial aid to purchase

⁶⁸ “Fixing the Broken Textbook Market, Third Edition,” *US PIRG Education Fund*, February 23, 2021, <https://pirg.org/edfund/resources/fixing-the-broken-textbook-market-third-edition/>.

⁶⁹ Virginia Clinton-Lisell and Alison E. Kelly, “The Cost of Doing Homework: Online Homework Systems with Access Codes from a Social Justice Perspective,” *International Journal of Technology in Education and Science* 8, no. 2 (2024): 296–310, <https://doi.org/10.46328/ijtes.547>, 1.

⁷⁰ “Fixing the Broken Textbook Market, Third Edition,” *US PIRG Education Fund*, February 23, 2021, <https://pirg.org/edfund/resources/fixing-the-broken-textbook-market-third-edition/>.

⁷¹ Melissa D. Olfert et al., “Struggling with the Basics: Food and Housing Insecurity among College Students across Twenty-Two Colleges and Universities,” *Journal of American College Health* 71, no. 8 (2023): 2518–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2021.1978456>.

⁷² J. Jacob Jenkins et al., “Textbook Broke: Textbook Affordability as a Social Justice Issue,” *Journal of Interactive Media in Education* 2020, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.5334/jime.549>, Table 3.

books can also limit the options students have for acquiring their course materials and their ability to find better deals through alternate means.

Among the stakeholders we spoke with, nearly all emphasized the importance of getting the students the materials they needed in an affordable and sustainable way. However, perceptions on the best way to achieve this goal varied greatly by stakeholder positionality. For example, an education technology company interviewee said, in regard to inclusive access programs, “surveys show [students] are happy that materials are cheaper and they have their materials. Not a single university has had student or faculty protests.” They indicated that students were satisfied because, in many ways, inclusive access programs achieve the dual goal of getting materials to students when they need them and in an affordable way. A university librarian we spoke with described a different situation on their campus; “In 2016 [a student group on campus] lobbied the attention of the president and were able to get him to commit to working on a textbook affordability program and it was deemed that the library would be a reasonable place to do so.” The program that came from student lobbying centered on helping faculty “recreate their course textbook, and turn it into an open and affordable textbook.” In both instances, stakeholders are speaking to students' needs, but are presenting evidence that supports different affordability models.

The student perspective of automatic billing programs is mixed, with some finding they increased their academic success and others being unaware they were enrolled in such a program or that they could have chosen to opt-out. According to a Tyton Partners report on affordable access programs, 84 percent of students in these programs felt better prepared, and 81 percent said they boosted their academic success.⁷³ Similarly, the 2025 National Association of College Stores Student Watch Report found that 57 percent of students were satisfied with their day-one access program experiences, and 64 percent thought that it was a better option than other ways to gather their course materials.⁷⁴ The most common praise from students related to convenience and being able to access

⁷³ “Tyton Partners Releases New Report on Affordable Access Programs for Course Materials,” *Tyton Partners*, April 28, 2025, <https://tytonpartners.com/course-materials-in-higher-education/>.

⁷⁴ “NACS Student Watch Report: Course Materials Spending Stable, High Satisfaction with Access Programs,” *National Association of College Stores*, August 20, 2025, <https://www.nacs.org/student-watch-report-course-materials-spending-stable>.

materials on the first day of classes.⁷⁵ However, as the Student Public Interest Research Groups found, 50 percent of students at institutions offering automatic textbook billing did not know that they were being billed, or that they could opt-out.⁷⁶ Similarly, the same study found that in schools with course-specific billing, 68 percent of students enrolled in autobilled courses were unaware that they could opt out or were unable to do so.⁷⁷

There has been a growing trend over the past many years, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, for textbooks and course materials to be offered digitally. Much of the OER materials are easily accessible online, many of the course reserves are virtual, and of course, the e-books that are accessible digitally. According to findings from a 2025 Bayview Analytics survey of teaching faculty, in the 2024-2025 academic year 10 percent of the courses in their sample provided print only versions of their textbooks, while 61 percent offered both the digital and print version for their classes.⁷⁸ In that same study, 44 percent of respondents indicated that they neither agreed or disagreed with the statement “students learn better from print materials than they do from digital materials.”⁷⁹ An executive in the higher education college store industry shared with us that for many students, they are receiving materials digitally prior to postsecondary coursework, in high school and sometimes earlier. “It’s not as big of a leap for those students; it’s what they are used to. The materials are provided to them in digital format through their LMS, so that’s their expectation when they get to college.”

However, not all students have reliable access to a computer or Wi-Fi. A library director shared that while the majority of the students at their institution do not have to pay for their textbooks, most of the course materials are only available digitally. While this is a major benefit for their students in terms of affordability, the digital format poses a common challenge for some students. For example, some try to print out entire

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ “Fixing the Broken Textbooks Market, Fourth Edition,” *Student PIRGs*, February 10, 2026, <https://studentpirgs.org/2026/02/10/fixing-the-broken-textbooks-market-fourth-edition/>, 2.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 2.

⁷⁸ Julia Seaman and Jeff Seaman, “Deeply Digital,” *Bay View Analytics*, accessed December 5, 2025, <https://www.bayviewanalytics.com/reports/deeplydigital2025.html>, 10.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 14.

textbooks to avoid reading the material on their phones or laptops. The director shared that this was a common challenge for both older students and traditionally-aged students. “We assume that students are digital natives, but they are only natives to their phones. They will complain that the books are online.” They went on to explain that many students only have a phone and the small screen makes it difficult to view the materials. In a similar vein, a university librarian observed, “Much of what I hear from students is about the desire to have the physical textbooks purchased by the libraries and made available by the libraries.” Likewise, a bookstore stakeholder shared, “I am still surprised every semester how many students want an actual physical book. They don’t want ebooks. They want a physical book. And professors will list these ebooks thinking they’re saving the student money and then the student emails me saying ‘I want a real book’.” The benefits, as well as the drawbacks, of digital textbooks and course materials are complex; what works well for one student or institution may not work as well for another.

“Much of what I hear from students is about the desire to have the physical textbooks purchased by the libraries and made available by the libraries.”

Faculty

Research shows that faculty are essential to a textbook affordability program, for they typically have the ultimate decision on the course materials used in class. Northern Illinois University created a list of recommendations for faculty members to consider before selecting their course materials. This included suggestions like “investigate the cost of a textbook before adopting it,” “avoid requiring more than one textbook for a course,” “use open education resources,” “use the same textbook for several semesters even if the publisher releases newer editions,” “develop your own course materials and post them online,” among a variety of others.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ “Textbook Affordability,” Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning, Northern Illinois University, accessed August 26, 2025,

Some faculty members who know about alternative textbook models are unable or unwilling to participate because of time and capacity constraints. In the case of OER, some instructors do not have the capacity to collaborate with library faculty or to create their own materials, and so it is more practical for them to assign a traditional textbook. Others do not trust OER that others created and would prefer to stay with traditional textbooks due to quality concerns. In a 2014 interview, the director of the Copyright and Digital College Scholarship Center in the North Carolina State University Libraries explained that when dealing with faculty hesitancy about OER, “we need to answer the question ‘Why should I bother changing?’ The status quo is easy, and the cost issue feels remote enough that it just doesn’t move the needle for a lot of faculty members...some faculty really don’t have the time to invest in creating customized, engaged instruction. If we want to see major change, we need to look at institutional incentives.”⁸¹

“Some faculty really don’t have the time to invest in creating customized, engaged instruction. If we want to see major change, we need to look at institutional incentives.”

Various institutions are experimenting with options to incentivize OER adoption. One solution is to incentivize faculty to create or use OER with course redesign grants.⁸² The University of Massachusetts, Amherst, libraries offer an Open Education Initiative (OEI) Grant Award for faculty to adopt, adapt, or create new OER, or incorporate existing materials into their classrooms.⁸³ Rutgers University Libraries also offers an Open and Affordable Textbooks Program, an incentive program that awards faculty

<https://www.niu.edu/citl/resources/guides/instructional-guide/textbook-affordability.shtml>.

⁸¹ Tomalee Doan, “Why Not OER?,” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 17, no. 4 (2017): 665–69, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2017.0039>, 66.

⁸² Zara T. Wilkinson, “The Prevalence of Textbook Affordability and OER Initiatives at ARL Libraries,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 50, no. 4 (2024): 102884, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2024.102884>.

⁸³ Theresa Dooley, “LibGuides: Open Educational Resources: Open Education Initiative (OEI) Grants,” University of Massachusetts Amherst, accessed October 27, 2025, <https://guides.library.umass.edu/OER/open-education-initiative>.

research funds to redesign courses to use free or low cost materials.⁸⁴ This program offers two awards: the Open and Affordable Textbooks (OAT) Course Redesign Award, which awards faculty \$2,500 in research funds to full time and part time faculty/instructors and curriculum developers; and the OAT Authoring Award, which awards \$3,500 to support the creation and development of a new open textbook.⁸⁵ As of 2025, the OAT program has saved students at Rutgers over \$13 million.⁸⁶ At Empire State University, recent collaborations between the library and instructional design teams have produced measurable impacts in affordability, course design, and student outcomes, including an average increase of pass rates of 12 percent across revised courses.⁸⁷

“[Students’] biggest complaint honestly, was not buying textbooks, it was buying textbooks that then the faculty member didn’t use.”

Several stakeholders noted that some faculty require textbooks but do not then use them in their course, frustrating students and adding unnecessary costs. An administrator with responsibilities for the bookstore said, “We have had students in some of our business classes and communication classes do some research on the bookstore; and [students’] biggest complaint honestly, was not buying textbooks, it was buying textbooks that then the faculty member didn’t use.” A bookstore executive had a similar example: according to data they collected, “the number one [factor influencing] a student’s decision on whether or not to buy their materials was whether the professor was going to use it or not. And they would talk to other students and that led a lot of students to delay their purchasing of their course materials and it led some students to skip buying their materials.” A publisher shared this critique and also tied it to how library staff time is used: “If you’ve had the students purchase this book for \$50 and you never have them crack it open, that’s such a waste. [And] it’s a waste of the librarian’s time and effort. There’s

⁸⁴ “Open and Affordable Textbooks Program,” Rutgers University Libraries, accessed October 27, 2025, <https://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/teaching-support/open-and-affordable-textbooks-program>.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Shannon Pritting et al, “Using Teamwork and Collaboration to Design Better Affordable Learning Experiences,” *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 2025, 10.

other faculty who deserve that librarian's time. If you're not going to follow through, you shouldn't have the luxury of their services frankly."

Availability and accessibility of course materials

Accessibility, in addition to affordability, is at the forefront of advocacy for alternative textbook models. There is a correlation between having access to class materials on the first day of classes and course completion rates. Studies on OER have shown that providing students with access to course materials on the first day of class sets students up for success.⁸⁸ It can also help lower the stress level for students.⁸⁹ A student surveyed in an Illinois State University library study explained that "without the stress of running around to find a textbook at a reasonable price, I was able to dive into the course and semester right away with no hesitation. It has allowed me to prepare and do well in all tests and other assignments thus far."⁹⁰

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

Academic institutions are currently facing challenges in meeting new accessibility standards set by the Americans with Disabilities Act Title II regulations. These regulations disproportionately affect public universities, but private institutions are not immune. Libraries are struggling to remediate webpages and electronic collection materials including theses and dissertations as well as to meet the demands of the wider campus in supporting the conversion of teaching materials. As digital textbooks will

⁸⁸ Nicholas B. Colvard et al., "The Impact of Open Educational Resources on Various Student Success Metrics," *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 30, no. 2 (2018): 262–76, 273.

⁸⁹ Julie A. Murphy et al., "Supporting an Inclusive and Equitable Classroom: Student Perspectives on a Textbook Affordability Initiative," *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 24, no. 2 (2024): 265–83, 279.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 271-272.

need to meet the new standards, features like screen reader compatibility, keyboard navigation, and alt text for images this may affect costs in the short term.⁹¹

For students who may be blind or visually impaired, there are existing accommodations in place: translating materials to Braille, auditory accommodations, screen readers, and special software. Accessibility standards may be falling short for some students: Joanne Weber and Michael Skyer note that alternative textbook models like OER are “designed *for*, but not *with* deaf end-users.”⁹² A 2022 study on deaf pedagogy and curriculum design within OER, found that “institutions or participants may conflate the situated needs of deaf learners (e.g., bimodal language), with other learning needs for people with other disabilities (e.g., Braille).”⁹³ In other words, sometimes it is assumed that some accessibility strategies or alternatives are interchangeable, and are generalized for people across disability groups. Although this barely touches the surface of challenges around class materials for students with disabilities, it needs to be considered in the larger conversation of textbook accessibility.

Technology

How students acquire textbooks

The costs of textbooks have risen at three times the rate of inflation since 1978, prompting students to seek new and affordable ways to acquire their texts for minimal costs. This section covers some of the options available to students:

For students who may be able to swap digital textbooks for print alternatives, meta-aggregators such as Bookfinder (<http://Bookfinder.com>) search internationally across domestic and foreign used bookstores to compare prices. For courses for which faculty

⁹¹ “Title II FAQs,” Americans with Disabilities Act, Nebraska, accessed October 27, 2025, <https://ada.unl.edu/title-ii-faqs/>.

⁹² Joanne Weber and Michael Skyer, “The Aesthetics of OER, Deaf Pedagogy, and Curriculum Design Contra the ‘Wicked’ Policy of Deaf Education,” *RIED Revista Iberoamericana de Educación a Distancia* 25, no. 2 (2022): 73–96, 83.

⁹³ Ibid.

are open to students using variant editions of textbooks, this option may provide students with well-priced alternatives.

Textbook rental for both e-texts and physical copies also provides course materials to students who only need limited-term access to specific titles. While Amazon provided both physical and ebook rentals at high volumes to students, they exited this space in 2023. Subsequently, companies like Chegg (<http://Chegg.com>) and eCampus (<http://eCampus.com>) have seen an increase in their market share for textbook rentals. Rental books, however, do not come with access codes or other supplemental student materials, so while renting course materials may save students money it may not provide them with the complete course materials they need. A spin on this model is Perlego (<https://www.perlego.com/>), an online textbook subscription library, which provides various add-ons to its content such as online note taking, read-aloud functionality, and citation generation but may not have a license for specific texts.⁹⁴

Students can also access increasing amounts of course material content through aggregators like VitalSource (<https://www.vitalsource.com>) or RedShelf (<https://www.redshelf.com>), who partner with campus bookstores on inclusive access programs. Students may then access this material via their campus learning management system. Textbooks obtained through these aggregators may not contain access to external or accompanying materials such as labs, interactive content, or videos. Individual platforms have their own enhancements, however, such as VitalSource's Bookshelf+ (<https://get.vitalsource.com/what-we-offer/bookshelf-plus>), which integrates AI tools with course materials to provide additional functionality. Individual publishers, most prominently Cengage, also offer subscriptions to their content with enhanced features via Cengage Unlimited (<https://www.cengage.com/unlimited/>), but this limits students to the content produced only by that publisher.

Finally, students can also purchase atomized portions of their course readings through the service LiveCarta (<https://livecarta.com/>), which sells individual chapters of textbooks at reduced prices. This site allows students or faculty to mix portions of content from other sources—

⁹⁴ Ithaka S+R is part of the nonprofit organization ITHAKA. ITHAKA is an investor in Perlego. For more information, see "ITHAKA Invests in Perlego to Make Course Materials Accessible and Affordable," <https://www.ithaka.org/news/ithaka-invests-in-perlego/>

including chapters, videos, quizzes, and AI generated content—into a bespoke learning resource.

Technology integration and alignment

The number of actors working within the course material ecosystem introduces challenges around how different technology platforms interact. A publisher interviewee shared that inconsistent data standards are one of the biggest friction points within this environment: “The supply chain has its challenges right now. Getting from a publisher to the distributor to the bookstore with different layers of technology, different interpretations of the data source, and different delivery expectations [- it’s challenging...] There’s a lot of different steps that have to align to ensure students get what they need on that first day of class when it’s all digital.” They went on to explain that when data does not map correctly, it causes billing problems as well as issues with delivering the materials within a learning management system, often requiring manual work on both the bookstore and publisher end to rectify.

Technology integration challenges emerge not just between actors in the larger ecosystem, but at the institutional level as well. For example, an administrator with responsibilities for the bookstore at a higher education institution said, “When we do offer an inclusive access program, it has to be opt-in because of [institutional] rules. The biggest issue with this is getting our e-texts that are opt-in automatically into [the learning management system]. So I have bookstore staff and library staff that spend a lot of time helping students [...] so that they’re able to sign in and download [an etext] into the learning management system so that they can use it correctly.” In a separate example, a bookstore stakeholder said, “[Sometimes students] think they are ordering a lab kit from us but they are not. They have to do one order just for the [access] code for the lab, and then they have to go to this other site and order the lab using the code that we sent them.” The amount of time spent by staff assisting students so that digital textbooks and course materials can be accessed, as well as the persistence needed by students who encounter these issues is an important challenge in the current course materials landscape.

Enhanced textbook content

Increasingly, digital textbooks offer much more than text to engage learners of different learning abilities. We describe some of the most prominent features of electronic courseware below.

Interactive features such as quizzes, video or multi-media add-ons, and instant feedback mechanisms increasingly compliment digital textbooks to provide students with multiple options to learn and review content. Some publisher tools are adaptive and are responsive to an individual student's areas of need.⁹⁵ Some tools also integrate AI-generated content to create learning activities in response to user-uploaded content.⁹⁶

Along with additional content, digital courseware also provides increased accessibility options for students with different learning abilities and across languages. Publishers such as Pearson support users' abilities to view immediate translations or see definitions to help students with their comprehension of the material.⁹⁷ Embedded screen-reader compatibility also enables read-aloud functionality to assist students with visual disabilities. Users can also modify fonts to increase the accessibility of content.

For faculty, digital courseware also offers feedback and data to support assessment of student learning. With built-in analytics, digital textbooks allow educators to track student engagement with assigned materials, completion rates, and comprehension levels. These tools simplify workflows for students who may be virtual, plus provide faculty with information that allows for tailoring course content to students' abilities. A publisher shared with us how these built-in analytics for different intermediaries impact transparency: "I have a dashboard and can go in anytime and see usage of students, for faculty. I can see what they're opening, I can see that they're reading, the time spent. There is total transparency. With the smaller distribution platforms, I don't get anything. I can't see any usage. The smaller platforms just don't have the structure

⁹⁵ Examples include Elsevier's Adaptive Quizzing (<https://elsevierresources.com/nhe-student-training/elsevier-adaptive-quizzing/>) and MacMillan's Achieve, Read, and Practice (<https://www.macmillanlearning.com/college/us/digital/achieve/read-and-practice>).

⁹⁶ For example, NotebookLLM (<https://notebook.google/>) paired with Google's Gemini.

⁹⁷ "Explore Pearson," Pearson, accessed August 6, 2026, <https://www.pearson.com/en-us/explore-pearson.html>.

or engineering in their dashboards to give publishers and faculty and administration the data that they're going to need in the future. I think the future is engagement." In a similar vein, an executive in the higher education college store industry said, "On the accountability side of things, digital presents a better understanding of how materials are being used and how students are mastering content [compared with print.] So there are opportunities there for institutions to better capture that and understand what's going on."

These tools do raise privacy concerns. Neither faculty assigning the material nor the students engaging with the content may be fully aware of what data is being tracked and how it may be used. Especially when faculty look to third-party course materials available online, they may not consider the implications on data privacy. One interviewee from a higher education consortia explained this, saying, "The publisher is able to collect data on what the student is doing [within the digital course material] - where they are clicking, where they are going outside of the platform [etc]. [With that data they] say we can predict the success of the students based on their behaviors, so that faculty can use that data to design courses for their students. [...] Surveillance is an unknown issue for most students, and their profiles are being deepened and expanded and sold, and faculty are unaware as well." This quote points to a concern with digital courseware, indicating a need for greater transparency on how these systems function.

As highlighted above, students complete their coursework across a range of devices and may have only intermittent access to the internet. To assuage these challenges, publisher tools such as McGraw Hill's Read Anywhere App facilitate synchronized access to course materials across devices.⁹⁸ Students can also download chapters of textbooks, compile notes or complete course assignments, or conduct other activities offline that will sync when the student is back online. Increased adoption of such tools will hopefully provide a robust learning environment for students to engage with their course materials in non-traditional ways and mitigate traditional challenges of digital materials such as link rot or connectivity issues.

⁹⁸ "Readanywhere App," McGraw Hill Higher Education, accessed August 6, 2026, <https://www.mheducation.com/highered/explore/readanywhere.html>.

Digital Rights Management (DRM) considerations

Digital rights management (DRM) uses a combination of technology and policies to ensure users abide by the legal protections of copyrighted materials. In the context of ebooks or other educational materials, DRM protections allow publishers to safeguard the intellectual property of course materials by prohibiting students from redistributing copyrighted materials, whether intentionally or inadvertently.

For the academic use cases of students, however, DRM presents challenges in the evolving ways in which course materials are consumed. There are several ways in which DRM controls may have inadvertent negative effects on student usage. For materials licensed to individual students, product keys (codes) activate an individual's access to content. Keys are not transferable, meaning students cannot resell textbooks once the product has been used even if they drop the course or purchase used course materials at a cheaper price without a unique key. Keys are often also time-bound for a semester or year, meaning a student's access to course materials is discontinued at the conclusion of the course. Product keys also may limit how many devices can be used in conjunction with course materials. For students who work across multiple devices, for instance a laptop, iPad, plus phone, DRM controls may inhibit their access to course materials across environments.

In support of copyright protections, DRM often prohibits users from copying content, including through screenshots or screen recording. DRM protections may also limit printing.⁹⁹ For students who compile external study notes, for example, or prefer to work from print copies, these protections are disruptive. For textbooks without DRM protections, there are fewer limits in regard to the number of pages that can be downloaded, and there is no expiration on access to downloaded materials, making it easier for users to study and conduct research.¹⁰⁰ Finally, DRM controls are often tied to geographic ranges of IP addresses to prevent piracy in other countries. For students who may be studying abroad or traveling

⁹⁹ Joanne Weber and Michael Skyer, "The Aesthetics of OER, Deaf Pedagogy, and Curriculum Design Contra the 'Wicked' Policy of Deaf Education," *RIED Revista Iberoamericana de Educación a Distancia* 25, no. 2 (2022): 73–96.

¹⁰⁰ "Reading Without Restrictions - How DRM-Free E-Books Remove Access Barriers," EBSCO, accessed October 27, 2025, <https://about.ebsco.com/blogs/ebscopost/2464652/reading-without-restrictions-how-drm-free-e-books-remove-access-barriers-0>.

during breaks, this impacts access to course materials. While DRM does help to prevent unauthorized redistribution of copyrighted materials, Kim and Leung argue that the removal of DRM from e-textbooks would be a beneficial trade-off for students and faculty.¹⁰¹

Artificial intelligence

Though student cheating and the unreliability of AI outputs, which can include hallucinations and biased information, have caused concerns within academia, its use is also becoming more ubiquitous by the day.¹⁰² Educators are increasingly exploring how to use AI, in particular, generative pre-trained transformer models (GPT), such as ChatGPT, to assist them with their work.¹⁰³ Using programs like ChatGPT can help educators create high-quality, easy-to-understand, and accessible materials. Schools like MIT Sloan provide a guide for their faculty to understand how to create custom GPTs for their classes: “These GPTs differ from standard chats through ChatGPT due to their custom instructions and ability to keep a knowledge base in addition to what ChatGPT has already been trained on.”¹⁰⁴ The MIT Sloan guide explains that faculty can use Custom GPTs as an interactive tutor to help students clarify assignments, provide personalized feedback on assignments, and encourage reflection and independent thinking.¹⁰⁵

Georgia Tech’s Design Intelligence Lab created Jill Watson, an AI teaching assistant for virtual classrooms, currently powered by ChatGPT.¹⁰⁶ Jill Watson was created as a question-answering system to provide information on assignments, exams, as well as deadlines, and grading

¹⁰¹ Jin-Hyuk Kim and Tin Cheuk Leung, “Eliminating Digital Rights Management from the E-Book Market,” *Information Economics and Policy* 57 (December 2021): 100935, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infoecopol.2021.100935>.

¹⁰² Leonardo Nicoletti and Dina Bass, “Generative AI Takes Stereotypes and Bias From Bad to Worse,” *Bloomberg*, June 9, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2023-generative-ai-bias/>.

¹⁰³ E. Dickey and A. Bejarano, “GAIDE: A Framework for Using Generative AI to Assist in Course Content Development,” 2024 IEEE Frontiers in Education Conference (FIE), Washington, DC, USA, 2024, pp. 1-9, doi: 10.1109/FIE61694.2024.10893132.

¹⁰⁴ “Custom GPTs at MIT Sloan: A Comprehensive Guide,” MIT Sloan Teaching & Learning Technologies, n.d., accessed October 27, 2025, <http://mitsloanedtech.mit.edu/ai/tools/custom-gpts-at-mit-sloan-a-comprehensive-guide/>.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ “Jill Watson,” Design Intelligence Lab, accessed October 27, 2025, <https://dilab.gatech.edu/jill-watson/>.

policies.¹⁰⁷ Faculty upload course content and students can ask questions in plain language, the way they would ask a teaching assistant.¹⁰⁸ Support for Jill Watson comes with the idea that it virtually enhances the teaching presence, which is defined as the design and facilitation of educational experiences by the instructor.¹⁰⁹ It launched in 2016, and has saved educators over 500 hours of work across multiple classes, and has evolved to cover 96 percent of questions with 86 percent precision as of Fall 2019.¹¹⁰

Additionally, as of 2024, Gemini, Google's AI assistant, has partnered with OpenStax, to increase access to trustworthy educational content.¹¹¹ Google's LearnLM Team has introduced Learn Your Way, an experiment that uses generative AI to transform textbook content into multiple representations personalized to the individual learner while preserving the integrity of the source material.¹¹² This program, while still in the experimental phase, allows for textbooks and course materials to be personalized for each student, rather than just the standard one-size-fits-all approach that teachers typically have to use.¹¹³

Textbook publishers are also incorporating AI into their platforms. Macmillan Learning has embedded an AI tutor into their digital platform,

¹⁰⁷ Karan Taneja et al., "Jill Watson: A Virtual Teaching Assistant Powered by ChatGPT," arXiv:2405.11070, preprint, arXiv, May 17, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2405.11070>.

¹⁰⁸ Sandeep Kakar et al, "Jill Watson: Scaling and Deploying an AI Conversational Agent in Online Classrooms," Generative Intelligence and Intelligent Tutoring Systems: 20th International Conference, June 10, 2024: https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1007/978-3-031-63028-6_7; Karan Taneja et al., "Jill Watson: A Virtual Teaching Assistant Powered by ChatGPT," arXiv:2405.11070, preprint, arXiv, May 17, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2405.11070>.

¹⁰⁹ Breon Martin, "The Return of Jill Watson," *National AI Institute for Adult Learning and Online Education*, July 5, 2024, <https://aialoe.org/the-return-of-jill-watson/>.

¹¹⁰ Ashok Goel, "AI-Powered Learning: Making Education Accessible, Affordable, and Achievable," arXiv:2006.01908, preprint, arXiv, June 2, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2006.01908>.

¹¹¹ "OpenStax Partners with Google's Gemini Apps," Rice University, accessed October 27, 2025, <https://news.rice.edu/news/2024/openstax-partners-googles-gemini-apps>.

¹¹² "Towards an AI-Augmented Textbook," LearnLM Team, Google, September 25, 2025, <https://arxiv.org/html/2509.13348v3>.

¹¹³ Gal Elidan and Yael Haramaty, "Learn Your Way: Reimagining Textbooks with Generative AI," Google Research, accessed October 27, 2025, <https://research.google/blog/learn-your-way-reimagining-textbooks-with-generative-ai/>.

Achieve.¹¹⁴ The tutor is described as an extension of the instructor, available at all times to answer any questions the student may have, without outright providing the answer.¹¹⁵ The tool uses Socratic questioning to help the student figure out the answer themselves.¹¹⁶ Macmillan also offers faculty the opportunity to turn off the AI tutor for their classes, depending on the instructor's preference.¹¹⁷ Recently, McGraw Hill also launched Sharpen Advantage, a personalized study support platform, offering study guides, quizzes, and student success metrics.¹¹⁸ McGraw Hill also has a variety of different AI tools integrated into their platforms, such as an AI Reader, and a learning and assessment system called ALEKS among others.¹¹⁹ One publisher stakeholder discussed the benefits of AI, where the syllabus and textbook are deposited into the courseware and it populates the assignments for the semester, noting that “engagement is off the charts [...] We’re finding more and more that we’re getting new faculty who have never used courseware before because it’s so easy to use because the AI piece puts it together for them. They don’t have to be tech savvy, they don’t have to do a lot of work, but it still engages the students.” An education technology company interviewee shared something similar: “We have an AI tutor; [...] the students love it, the instructors love it. It doesn’t give answers, it encourages the students along the way.”

At UCLA, a professor is offering a medieval literature course that will use an AI-generated textbook, which has the capabilities to guide students through the basic materials, thereby allowing the professor the

¹¹⁴ Ashley Mowreader, “Students and Instructors Say AI Tool Helps With Understanding, Confidence in Course Materials,” *Inside Higher Ed*, January 22, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/academic-life/2025/01/22/survey-college-students-enjoy-using-generative-ai>.

¹¹⁵ Ayana Archie, “So Long, Study Guides? The AI Industry Is Going after Students,” *NPR*, August 6, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/08/06/g-s1-81012/chatgpt-ai-college-students-chegg-study>.

¹¹⁶ Ashley Mowreader, “Students and Instructors Say AI Tool Helps With Understanding, Confidence in Course Materials,” *Inside Higher Ed*, January 22, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/academic-life/2025/01/22/survey-college-students-enjoy-using-generative-ai>.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Rachel Lawler, “McGraw Hill Launches Sharpen Advantage, a New AI-Powered, Personalized Offering,” *EdTech Innovation Hub*, October 2, 2026, <https://www.edtechinnovationhub.com/news/mcgraw-hill-launches-sharpen-advantage-a-new-ai-powered-personalized-offering>.

¹¹⁹ “McGraw Hill’s Approach to Artificial Intelligence (AI),” McGraw Hill, October 30, 2025, <https://www.mheducation.com/about-us/trust-center/our-ai-approach.html>.

opportunity to work with their students in a new way.¹²⁰ The textbook, which costs \$25, only includes information and materials that the professor has provided, and new materials can always be added as the semester progresses. Using AI-powered textbooks may allow a professor to specifically cater to the needs of their students.

Other educators have much more negative views about incorporating AI into their classrooms. Interviewed in a recent article, Thomas Davis, an associate professor of English at Ohio State University, explained that using AI in the classroom was like “Creating our own replacements at the expense of everyone who cares about teaching and learning.”¹²¹ The move to AI-generated textbooks also requires teachers to have a strong level of digital literacy.¹²² Seventy-six percent of respondents to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP)’s report on AI and academic professions felt that “AI is deflating job enthusiasm, 69 percent believed that it is hurting student success, 62 percent said it has created worse outcomes in the teaching environment; 40 percent said it’s eroding academic freedom, and 30 percent said it’s weakened pay equity.”¹²³

More broadly, current research on AI in educational settings continues to stress that “while AI has potential as a tool, its current capabilities are limited, especially in academic text generation.”¹²⁴ Some researchers stress that while many academic applications are benefiting from integration with artificial intelligence tools, text generation suffers from overly simplistic depiction of material and may contain factual error or

¹²⁰ Sean Brenner, “Comparative Lit Class Will Be First in Humanities Division to Use UCLA-Developed AI System,” *University of California News*, December 5, 2024, <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/comparative-lit-class-will-be-first-humanities-division-use-ucla-developed-ai-system>

¹²¹ Kathryn Palmer, “The AI-Generated Textbook That’s Making Academics Nervous,” *Inside Higher Ed*, December 13, 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/learning-assessment/2024/12/13/ai-assisted-textbook-ucla-has-some-academics>.

¹²² G. E. M. Report, “AI Textbooks to Arrive in Korea – the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,” *World Education Blog*, UNESCO, January 3, 2025, <https://world-education-blog.org/2025/01/03/ai-textbooks-to-arrive-in-korea-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly/>.

¹²³ Kathryn Palmer, “Report: Faculty Often Missing From University Decisions on AI,” *Inside Higher Ed*, July 22, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/shared-governance/2025/07/22/faculty-often-missing-university-decisions-ai>.

¹²⁴ Hatice Yildiz Durak et al., “A Comparison of Human-Written Versus AI-Generated Text in Discussions at Educational Settings: Investigating Features for ChatGPT, Gemini and BingAI,” *European Journal of Education* 60, no. 1 (2025): e70014, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.70014>.

bias.¹²⁵ Increasingly, AI-generated content is entering library collections, complicating the landscape of providing students with quality and authoritative resources, and, as one article noted, “negatively impacting our collections.”¹²⁶

Barriers to moving to new textbook affordability models

During our interviews, we asked stakeholders, “In your professional opinion, what are the possible barriers to moving from an existing textbook affordability model to a new model?” Their responses were wide-ranging, and we group some of these under themes below:

- *Fragmented market*: “To me it’s one thing. It’s inertia. And that has to do with how fragmented the market is. I don’t think many people who aren’t familiar with the market have an appreciation for how fragmented this market is [...] there has to be 50 thousand different opinions, and we welcome that—it’s academia and part of the ethos is to question a lot of things, but that fragmentation makes it hard to build inertia around any single opportunity or solution.” (Publisher)
- *Legacy teaching models*: “Many faculty default to teaching the way they were taught. And that is with traditional materials and sometimes very specific texts. This legacy model of teaching is one challenge. Another challenge is preciousness; ‘I think that the way that I teach is precious and nobody else can do it as well as I can do it. And I’ve crafted this unique approach, and this unique approach is somehow tied to the commercial textbook.’ I don’t

¹²⁵ Nick Tanzi, “Addressing AI-Generated Materials in the Library Collection,” *The Digital Librarian*, August 5, 2025, <https://the-digital-librarian.com/2025/08/05/addressing-ai-generated-materials-in-the-library-collection/>.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

understand the logic, but I've encountered it many times."
(Consortia leader)

- *Bookstore contracts:* "I do think the bookstore contracts are inherently a problem ... If someone were to look at the process and say, where is there value being added, then whoever is [adding value] should be compensated for that. You have to do the course set-ups and you have to reconcile the bursar's office and you've got to make sure the billing's happening with the students and whoever provided the course materials gets paid, etc. But the bookstores don't do any of that. So why do the bookstores get any of the money?" (Education technology company leader)
- *Internet accessibility and Title II compliance:* "Access to the internet. We can't always count on the fact that all of our students have equitable or even equal access to the internet, especially when they're not on campus. So I see that as a barrier. The other is ADA and the Title II compliance that is coming up. That provides another barrier if institutions aren't moving forward with addressing or remediating the materials that they make available via their course reserve systems." (University librarian)
- *Student support:* "[A barrier for a new model] is how would students pay for that? Who's going to help them get the books? Who's going to help them figure out how to pay for it? Right now we have staff at the store that does all of that. Who's going to hold their hand while they're scared and they don't understand which book they need to buy and which is optional? If they have a disability, who is going to help them if they need a different form of text? If they're a veteran, who is going to help make sure they don't have to pay for the course materials and then be reimbursed, but that there's someone who will help them bill the VA?" (Administrator with responsibilities for the bookstore)

It is clear that the barriers to shifting from an existing textbook affordability model to an adapted or new model are many. It's also clear that the perceived barriers vary greatly by stakeholder positionality. In many ways, the fragmented market barrier framed in the first quote is reflected in the differences in perspective just among the stakeholders interviewed. This is an important aspect of the textbook affordability landscape because successful implementation of alternative course

materials affordability models requires coordination among these different stakeholders.

For instance, in 2006, the Illinois Board of Higher Education noted that alternative programs and textbook rental programs could be cost-efficient for students, but “For such efforts to be successful, they will need the support of institutional administrators, students, faculty, bookstore operators, and publishers.”

While stakeholder positionality and perspectives on the best path forward varied widely, they coalesced around the shared goal of student affordability and impact.

Conclusion

When we were conducting this research in the spring and summer of 2026, the increasing prevalence of generative AI features and content within course materials introduced new questions about content generation, assessment of learning outcomes, and user privacy. In this evolving landscape, research on the implications of AI in student learning must keep pace with technological developments over the next several years to ensure both faculty and students understand how AI impacts student learning experiences.

While reducing textbook costs for many students remains important, it creates a complicated network of digital resources that faculty and students are still learning to navigate.

Even setting aside AI, however, our environmental scan elucidates an incredibly complex landscape that, while reducing textbook costs for many students remains important, it creates a complicated network of digital resources that faculty and students are still learning to navigate. It is difficult for both faculty and students to understand and master the complex infrastructure, rights, and means by which to acquire course

materials. Whereas students traditionally had the option to purchase print copies as an alternative, the ubiquity of digital-only course materials now renders this option obsolete. The landscape also presumes that both faculty and students are digitally literate and have reliable access to internet and hardware, but digital divides persist across the US that challenge these assumptions.

Affordability models, such as inclusive and equitable access programs, are helping to curb student textbook and course material costs. These programs address documented problems with procurement of course materials including variable costs across disciplines and ensuring that students are granted access to learning materials early in the semester. The literature along with our interviews make frequent reference to OER programs as successful in augmenting or replacing traditional textbooks within individual disciplines or degree programs. Evaluating both the advantages and concerns around these models allowed the three SUNY campuses involved in this project to think through new approaches for supplying free or low-cost educational resources to students in the future. As this environmental scan makes clear, no current program meets the needs of all institutions. Context matters. Thoughtful engagement is needed around the variety of models that benefit a particular academic program or institution.

This report is the first of two publications focused on textbook affordability within this comprehensive research project. Over the coming months, we will interview faculty from across the three participating SUNY institutions and conduct a large-scale survey of students. We are pleased for the opportunity to conduct this stakeholder research to augment the findings of this environmental scan and look forward to synthesizing our collective findings in a forthcoming publication.

Appendix A: Policies

With the variety of changes around textbook affordability models, policymakers and institutions have developed a range of strategies across federal, state, and institutional levels across the country. This section focuses on federal policies such as the Higher Education Opportunity Act, and the wide range of state policies passed across 32 states in the United States. The institutions at the focus of our research, SUNY Empire, Monroe Community College, and SUNY Canton, do not have specific policies around textbook affordability.

Federal policy

Higher Education Opportunity Act

The predominant federal policy regulating textbooks and course materials at US higher education institutions can be found in the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA).¹²⁷ The act was signed into law on August 14, 2008. Section 20 U.S. Code § 1015b specifically lays out policies regarding textbook information, explicitly stating:

It is the intent of this section to encourage all of the involved parties, including faculty, students, administrators, institutions of higher education, bookstores, distributors, and publishers, to work together to identify ways to decrease the cost of college textbooks and supplemental materials for students while supporting the academic freedom of faculty members to select high quality course materials for students.

HEOA applies to all US higher education institutions that receive federal financial assistance and lays out requirements for both publishers as well as institutions. When publishers share textbook information with individuals in charge of selecting course materials at these institutions, they need to provide the price of the material for the bookstore as well as the price of the material for the public. Likewise, if they offer the textbook

¹²⁷ Higher Education Opportunity Act, Pub. L. No. 110-315, 122 Stat. 3078 (2008), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-110publ315/pdf/PLAW-110publ315.pdf>

or course materials in other formats, such as a paperback edition, they must provide pricing information. Publishers also have to describe content differences between the current edition and its predecessor and disclose copyright dates for previous editions. Importantly, HEOA also outlines a provision requiring publishers to offer materials they typically bundle together, separately. For example, if a textbook is bundled with supplemental materials, the publisher must have individual prices available for the components so they can be purchased separately.

Institutions are required to post textbook ISBN numbers on their course schedules as well as the price of those textbooks and other required course materials. However, “if the institution determines that the disclosure of the information described [...] is not practicable for a college textbook or supplemental material, then the institution shall so indicate by placing the designation ‘To Be Determined’ in lieu of the information required [...]” In addition, institutions must furnish their bookstores with 1) the course schedule for the next academic period, 2) the number of students enrolled in each course, and 3) the maximum student enrollment per course. HEOA also says that institutions are “encouraged to disseminate to students information regarding” any rental or used textbook options, textbook buy-back programs, or any other strategies for students to minimize course material costs.

Importantly, the textbook information section of HEOA highlights the importance of academic freedom. It states, “Nothing in this section shall be construed to supersede the institutional autonomy or academic freedom of instructors involved in the selection of college textbooks, supplemental materials, and other classroom materials.” The law aims to provide price transparency for faculty and students rather than dictate materials.

In 2013, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report assessing how institutions were implementing the textbook information requirements.¹²⁸ The report found that about 81 percent of relevant institutions implemented the law but that the “stakeholders GAO interviewed said these practices have had little effect on faculty decisions.” Though it had little effect on course material choices, the

¹²⁸ US Government Accountability Office, *College Textbooks: Students Have Greater Access to Textbook Information*, GAO-13-368 (June 2013), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/files.gao.gov/assets/gao-13-368.pdf>

report found that the increased transparency did help students. Having the textbook information provided regularly allowed students to make informed decisions: “[representatives of student organizations said they had sufficient information and time to comparison shop for their course materials before each academic term.]”

While the majority of institutions adhered to HEOA requirements at the time of the report, approximately 19 percent of higher education institutions did not provide textbook information online. Some, including institutions with inclusive and equitable access programs, do not provide this information because required course materials are included in tuition and fees.

Title 34 § 668.164

Under Title 34 § 668.164, institutions are allowed to “include the costs of books and supplies as part of tuition and fees” provided the school offers those course materials “below competitive market rates,” that students are able to receive those materials “by the seventh day of a payment period,” and as long as students are able to “opt out of the way the institution provides for the student to obtain books and supplies.”¹²⁹ Institutions are also allowed to bundle course material fees with tuition if the materials are unavailable or inaccessible to students except through the school or its approved channels, or, if there is “a compelling health or safety reason” to do so.

Bill introduced to Congress: Affordable College Textbook Act

While not currently federal law, a bill called the Affordable College Textbook Act has been introduced “at the last six Congresses.”¹³⁰ If passed, this bill would encourage the use of open educational resources by “mak[ing] grants to institutions of higher education or states to support projects that expand the use of open textbooks in order to achieve savings for students while maintaining or improving instruction and student learning outcomes.”

¹²⁹ Code of Federal Regulations. 34 CFR 668.164. <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-34/section-668.164>.

¹³⁰ Affordable College Textbook Act, S.978, 118th Cong. (2023). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/97>; “The Affordable College Textbook Act (H.R.1886/S.740),” SPARC, August 6, 2026. <https://sparcopen.org/our-work/affordable-college-textbook-act/>.

State Policy

The primary focus for state policies relating to textbook affordability is in reference to Open Educational Resources.¹³¹ As SPARC's policy tracker reports, 32 states have policies in place focusing on open educational resources.¹³² The majority of these policies were created in the early 2020s. One of the earliest policies, created in North Dakota in 2013, focused on open textbooks within the North Dakota University state system, pushing their increased use for affordability purposes. A large portion of policies were created in response to financial burdens related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The OER policies generally fall under one of four themes: transparency, OER grant programs and funding, institutional planning and coordination, and the creation of repositories and infrastructure.

Transparency

A number of states require that their institutions clearly indicate to students which courses use OER. For instance, Alaska requires the University of Alaska System to identify in its online course schedule which requires zero-cost or low-cost materials, and to also disclose any automatic fee charged to students upon registering. Florida established the Student Open Access Resources (SOAR) Grant Program and Repository, which is similarly structured to Alaska's program, in that it requires institutions to mark zero-textbook-cost/OER courses with a clear icon within registration systems and on their websites as early as possible but at least 45 days before classes begin. Both Oregon and California also push this a bit further by requiring a clear display of estimated course materials costs for a share of listed classes for at least 75 percent of total courses for Oregon public universities and colleges listed on the online course schedule.

OER Grants and Funding

Starting in 2018 Colorado created its open educational resources council as well as a grant program to support the generation of OER, and made a \$660k appropriation. In 2023, Colorado continued a multi-year

¹³¹ "OER State Policy Playbook: 2026 Edition," SPARC, 2026, https://sparcopen.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/SPARC_OER_State_Policy_Playbook_2026.pdf

¹³² "OER State Policy Tracker," SPARC, accessed June 5, 2026, <https://sparcopen.org/our-work/state-policy-tracking/>.

appropriations for its OER Council of \$1 million in appropriations for each of the next five fiscal years. In 2023, the state of Illinois allocated \$3 million in OER grants to academic libraries. In the same year, Wisconsin required the Wisconsin Technical College System to award grant funding to district boards to generate shareable OER materials. Also in 2023, the state of Minnesota supported the implementation of a Z-degree program with dedicated funding across the 2024 and 2025 fiscal years. New Mexico funds an OER pilot program to help incentivize faculty to create or adopt open textbooks. Michigan invests in the Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute, which is meant to provide an internet-based platform that educators can use to create student-centric learning tools and resources, through a state OER repository.

Institutional Planning and Coordination

Connecticut's 2023 bills focus on refining definitions of OER, improving data collection practices, adjusting reporting schedules to be biennial, as well as integrating an OER Coordinating Council as part of the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities in developing model institutional OER policies. New Jersey requires institutions to produce an open textbook plan after faculty consultation, and then submit it to the state to explicitly achieve savings for the students. Idaho combines the funding line for a zero-textbook cost program with statewide higher ed policy requiring public four-year institutions to develop affordability plans that use OER where possible.

Repositories and Infrastructure

Texas has a contract with a high-quality OER repository portal, establishes OER grants and course schedule indicators, as well as broader textbook transparency requirements, in addition to earlier publisher/faculty disclosure and unbundling concepts. Louisiana combines a pilot program for an open/no cost digital textbooks tool, with the Louisiana Board of Regents plan to develop and implement plans for more affordable educational resources and a sustainable digital repository. Nebraska also has their Education Technology Center evaluate internet based digital education courses as well as open educational resources.

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