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# BE BOOK SMART!

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## 2018 IMPACT REPORT

Written by University of Alberta Students' Union Vice-President Academic and Chair of the Open Educational Resources Steering Committee Akanksha Bhatnagar



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## PREAMBLE

Open Educational Resources (OERs) are instructional materials whose creators offer them without a copyright, or with minimal copyright restrictions. Textbooks, course-packs, multimedia content, and slideshows – among others – can be OERs. An OER is free for anyone to use, alter, and redistribute.

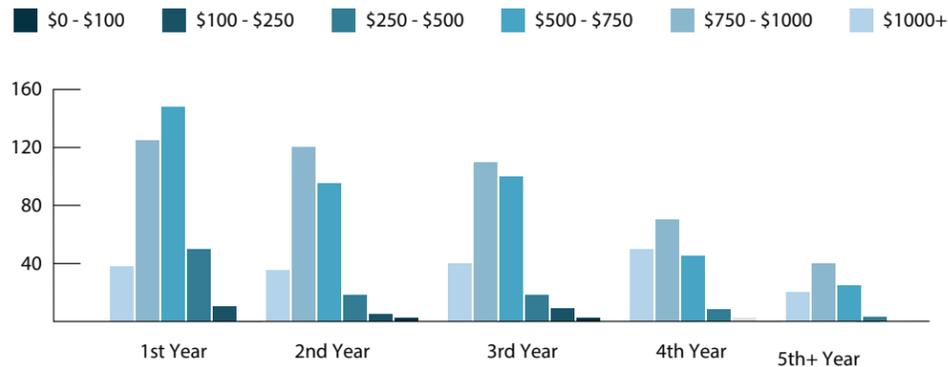
OERs have gigantic implications for the cost and accessibility of education. Unfortunately, conversations with professors and specialists across Alberta have indicated that higher education suffers from a knowledge deficit. Many professors don't necessarily know when they are using OERs, or communicate OER use to their students. As a result, neither institutions nor students are likely to have a clear picture of OER usage on any given campus.

In January 2018, UASU conducted the 'Be Book Smart' survey to partially address this knowledge gap, and to introduce students to the concept of OERs. The brief survey, comprising 18 multiple-choice questions and one short-answer question, ran from January 8 to 31 inclusive. It reached 1,187 points of contact, well distributed across faculties and undergraduate years of study. UASU believes this survey is broadly representative of trends and attitudes within the student population.

## KEY FINDINGS

- First-year students spend significantly more on textbooks, even though they opt out of buying textbooks almost as frequently as other students.
- Many students go without any textbook, or use online resources instead.
- Students draw a strong connection between academic success and the cost of textbooks.
- Many students avoid or drop classes based on textbook costs, leading to a different educational experience. 10% have been forced to choose between textbooks and food or monthly necessities.
- Most students have never heard of OERs, and many are dubious about their value and quality. However, most students believe they would still benefit from OERs.
- Students report that textbook prices have implications for accessibility and accommodation.

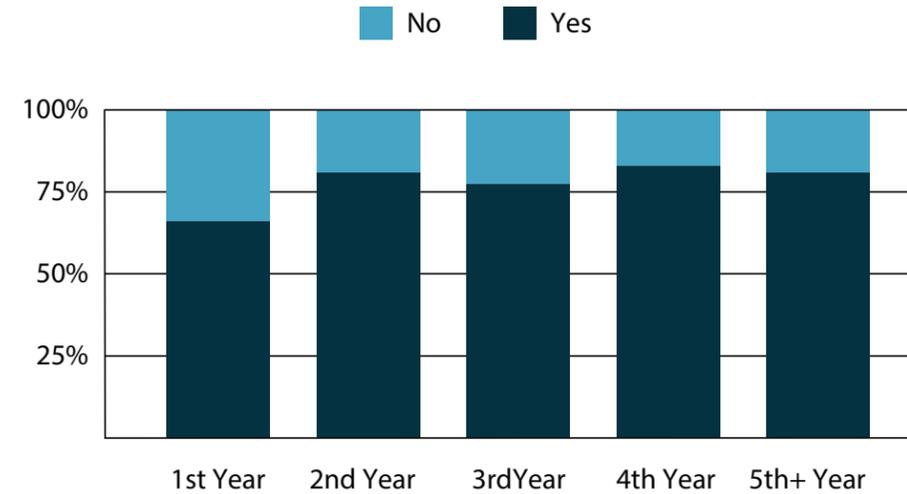
## COST OF TEXTBOOKS



'On average, how much do you spend on textbooks in a semester for all of your classes, in total?'

The average student pays \$100-\$250 per semester, and \$250-\$500 is also very common. However, by proportion, the average first-year student is significantly more likely to pay \$250-\$500 or \$500-\$750. Policy-makers should consider whether the high cost of first-year textbooks bears any relationship to dropout rates. Note that, as outlined below, students frequently select classes based on textbook cost (15.7%) or drop classes for the same reason (6.6%). Generalized to the broader population, it is reasonable to assume that around two thousand current undergraduates have dropped a class due to the cost of instructional materials.

Third- and fourth-year students are far more likely than other students to pay \$0-\$100 per semester. The survey data offers no concrete explanation for this trend. In part, it may reflect the lower costs of seminar-style courses that rely on academic journal articles. Comparably, upper-year thesis or capstone requirements do not typically come with lists of required textbooks. Upper-year students, burned by first-year textbook costs, might be opting to purchase only some of their books. Professors of upper-year courses may simply be requiring cheaper texts.

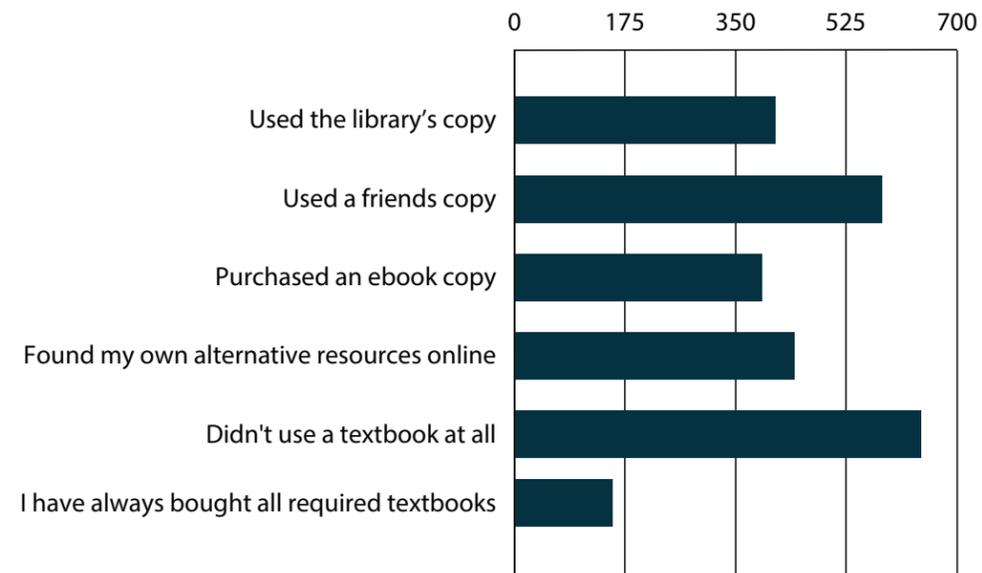


'Have you ever chosen NOT to buy a textbook for a course because of the cost?'

First-year students, who tend to pay more for textbooks, may also be less likely to opt out of buying textbooks due to cost. Due to the 'have you ever' format of the question, every year included first-year textbook spending by default. After first year, then, students are more likely (~15 percentage points) to have chosen not to buy a textbook due to cost.

Overall, course materials appear to place a significantly higher burden on first-year students, and may be less of a burden for upper-year students. Further research could examine the reasons for these trends. In the meantime, the respondents' voices are clear: first-year students face disproportionate barriers.

## COPING STRATEGIES



'Have you ever done the following INSTEAD of buying a textbook? (Select all that apply)'

Only 6% of students have always bought all required textbooks. A full 94% have at some point taken advantage of an alternative strategy that did not involve buying a required textbook (e.g. library copy, using a friend's copy, using various kinds of online resources, or using no textbook at all). 24% have resorted to finding alternate resources online; qualitative responses indicate that search engines and Wikipedia are representative choices. A full 17% of respondents, plausibly representing around 5,600 undergraduates across campus, have opted to use no textbook for a given course.

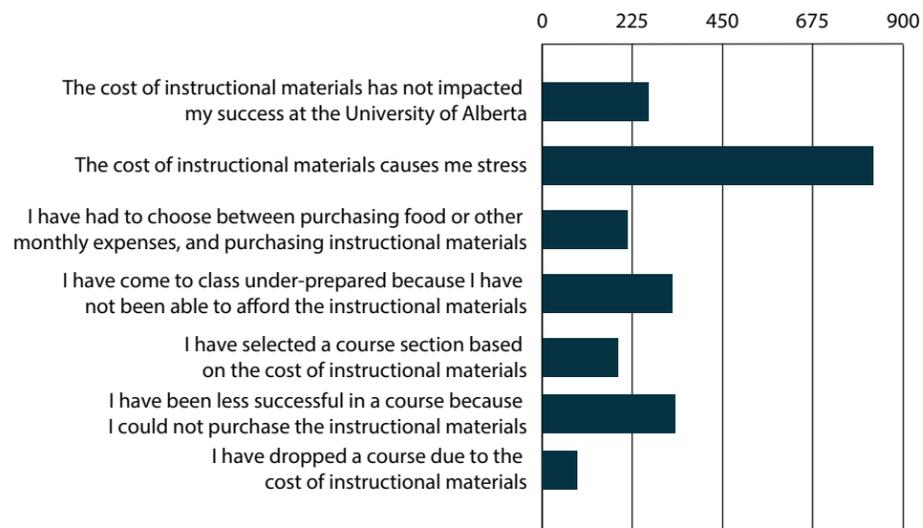
Students outlined their alternative textbook strategies in an optional short answer segment. Many indicated that they sourced older versions through the Internet, such as Amazon Prime Student, Kijiji, or Facebook buy-and-sell pages. These transactions can leave them vulnerable to fraud, or simply unable to get a refund if they drop a course. Some students said that alternative strategies were untenable for accessibility reasons related to vision and hearing.

## OTHER NOTEWORTHY RESPONSES

- "Avoided the course."
- "The possibilities are truly endless when you are cheap and broke."
- "Bought the textbook with friends in the class to share."
- "Every student in our department was forced to buy a subscription to Vital-Source."
- "I try to choose courses that have other options like academic journals and course packs instead."
- "I have to buy them before I can get my accommodations (audio format.)"
- "Googled topics I don't understand, taken notes from online resources, and used online note banks and online flashcards other people have posted."
- "Split textbooks list in half with a friend and we each bought 1/2 of the books and shared."
- "Photocopy and torrent."
- "Can't use online docs, can't read them effectively."

## IMPACTS

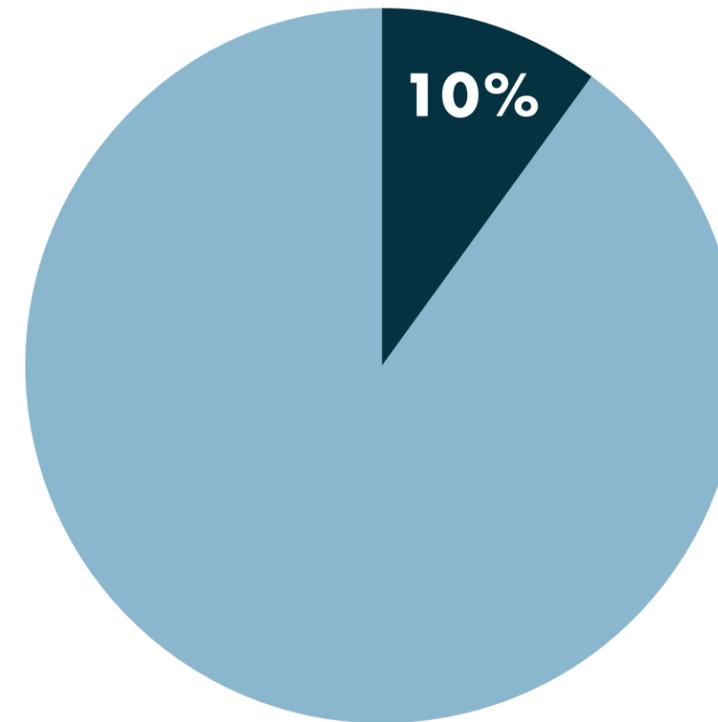
'How has the cost of instructional materials impacted your success at the University of Alberta?



'Have you ever done the following INSTEAD of buying a textbook? (Select all that apply)'

Unsurprisingly, respondents were quick to link textbook costs to specific, prompted impact choices. Nevertheless, it is clear that students identify textbook costs as a motivating factor that can shape their educational trajectory. 29% report lower success due to the cost of instructional materials. 80.6% strongly agree that the price of instructional materials is too high. Only 12% say that the cost of instructional materials has not impacted their success.

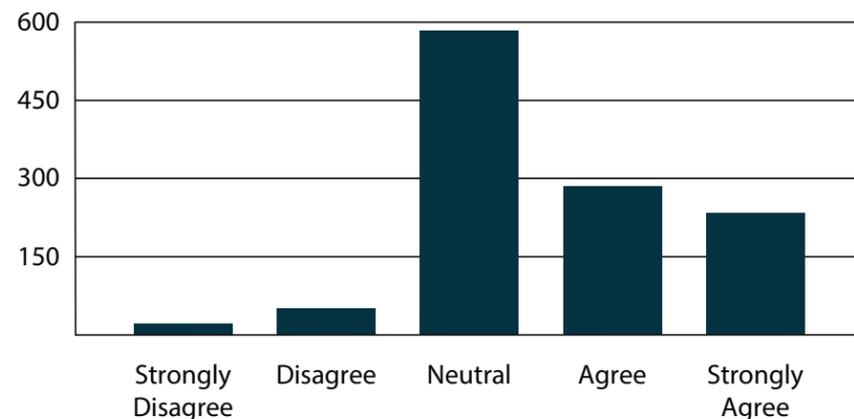
As noted above, 15.7% of students select classes based on textbook cost, and 6.6% have dropped classes for the same reason. Students under financial pressure will select a somewhat different set of classes over the course of their education than they otherwise would. While quality of education and cost of textbooks have no direct causal link, it is concerning to think that students of modest means may receive a different educational experience.



Food insecurity

The food insecurity implications are similarly troubling: 10% of respondents have been forced to choose between purchasing food (or other monthly expenses) and purchasing instructional materials. Proportionally, 10% of the undergraduate population would represent over three thousand students.

KNOWLEDGE OF OERS



'Open Educational Resources are of the same quality as more expensive textbooks.'

82.4% of respondents had never heard of OERs before this survey. 38.7% are unsure whether they have ever been in a class that used OERs, and 43.3% are certain they have never been in a class that used OERs. These numbers, while grim, represent a significant opportunity to inform students. UASU is working to address this demonstrable knowledge deficit via initiatives like Be Book Smart, which encompasses public consultation and events.

When students do not have a strong understanding of OERs, their confidence in alternative instructional materials decreases sharply. 50.9% are unsure whether OERs are of the same quality as more expensive textbooks; 25.3% are unsure whether they would be able to learn from OERs.

However, students are clearly open to OERs in principle. 71.7% believe that using an OER would benefit their learning experience. 73.4% either agree or strongly agree that they would be able to learn from OERs.

CONCLUSION

The price of textbooks can all too easily obstruct education at the University of Alberta. It forces students to put their ingenuity on display. Many adapt by innovating their own solutions, or rely on obsolete or free resources of variable quality.

Some of these choices can be understood as a natural part of the higher education experience. Others, however, are concerning. Accessibility issues, especially around vision, featured in several responses. Many students actively avoid or drop courses where textbook costs are a barrier, which can produce a different educational experience based on the circumstances of a student or their family. Implications for food insecurity are equally troubling: hundreds, perhaps thousands, of students need to choose between textbooks and food.

Most students have never been exposed to Open Educational Resources, and many have no idea whether their classes have used OERs. These findings indicate a great opportunity to inform the student body and their instructors about a viable strategy with far-reaching implications.

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