

## CASE STUDIES

# Assessing Textbook Costs at a Small College

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In recent years, the cost of textbooks has risen drastically, making it an important issue for everyone involved in higher education. Accurate and specific information on the cost of textbooks is needed to effectively address the situation. Over the summer of 2018, a librarian and an undergraduate student at a small liberal arts college assessed the textbook costs at their institution, using methodology developed by community colleges doing similar research. Based on course catalogs, bookstore records, and other resources, they calculated the costs for students in different disciplines over four years of study. These costs were impacted by major, courses chosen, and where materials were purchased. Patterns included higher prices in the sciences than in the humanities, as well as more expensive textbooks at the college bookstore than at other sources. Estimated total textbook costs varied widely (from under \$100 to over \$7,000 for four years of study), leading the researchers to conclude that no single average was representative of any one student's experience.

**Keywords:** textbook costs; OER; open access; textbooks; course materials

## Introduction

### *About Textbook Cost and Spending Research*

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the cost of college textbooks increased 88% between 2006 and 2016, while tuition and fees increased 63%.<sup>1</sup> The College Board reported that most four-year undergraduate students should budget just over \$1,200 on books and supplies for the 2018–2019 academic year, using budgets provided by institutional financial aid offices.<sup>2</sup> This is an increase of over \$100 from the figure given for the 2009–2010 academic year.<sup>3</sup>

Since 2016, a number of studies have examined what students actually pay for textbooks. After surveying around 35,000 students from 63 different schools, the National Association of College Stores reported that average student spending on required course materials in the 2017–2018 academic year was \$484; this did not include technology and school supplies, on which students spent an average of \$612 during the same period.<sup>4</sup> This was a decrease from the 2007 number of \$701, possibly due to increased use of free online materials. Florida Virtual Campus found that nearly half of its 20,000 respondents spent at least \$300 on textbooks for the Spring 2018 term, with over one tenth spending at least \$500; this report also noted a decrease in students spending over \$300 and an increase in those spending under \$300

when compared with Spring 2016.<sup>5</sup> There were increases in the number of students using strategies to reduce textbook costs such as renting textbooks, buying used books, and seeking alternatives to the campus bookstore. Other possible explanations for the decrease in direct spending include changes in textbook bundling models and increased use of alternative materials.<sup>6</sup>

There are two characteristics of the above studies that led us to conduct our own research. First, the scale and scope of those studies is so large the relevance to individual institutions is unclear. Nationwide averages that cover all types of schools or surveys of large statewide networks may not accurately reflect the situation at a small liberal arts college. Second, most existing data comes primarily from surveys of students themselves. However, it does not necessarily reflect the actual amount that students are expected to spend, especially if that varies from one type of institution to another. Especially in the case of the Florida Virtual Campus work, which focused on how textbook prices affected students' choices (such as how often they did without a required textbook), the survey model makes sense.

Research done by Open Oregon Educational Resources provides a model for filling in these gaps. Oregon's statewide open educational resources (OER) coordinator worked with point persons and campus bookstore managers at each community college to estimate the total textbook costs for specific degrees; the results showed an average cost of between \$2,002.96 and \$2,316.19 over two years, depending on the degree, which is just under the College Board's nationwide averages.<sup>7</sup> The methodology came originally from Quill West and was further developed by SPARC's Nicole Allen.<sup>8</sup>

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In Virginia, librarians conducted a similar study on the state's community colleges for the 2016–2017 school year and found an average cost of \$1,024.01 for that year, which when doubled is similar to the Oregon number for a two-year program.<sup>9</sup>

Libraries have always worked to remove barriers to information, so it is no surprise that much of the research on textbook costs has been done by academic librarians. Increasing numbers of library positions are devoted to open access and OER. Various organizations provide support for this work; for example, the librarian who worked on this project was the Open Textbook Network Leader for Randolph College, having received training from the Virtual Library of Virginia (VIVA). This is only one of VIVA's initiatives, which also include a grant program for encouraging faculty to create OER.<sup>10</sup> Reducing cost barriers for students through textbook cost and OER research is an increasingly important element of academic library work.

### **Randolph College and the Summer Research Program**

Randolph College is a private, undergraduate liberal arts institution in central Virginia. It was founded in 1891 as Randolph-Macon Woman's College and became coeducational in 2007, when it was also renamed Randolph College. There are two small master's programs, but the primary focus is on the approximately 700 undergraduate students. In 2019, the school announced a price reset, dropping tuition from over \$40,000 to \$25,000 per year.<sup>11</sup> Assessing and perhaps eventually lowering textbook costs fit well with those efforts.

This project was done as part of the school's 2018 Summer Research Program. Each year teams (usually composed of one faculty member and one or two student researchers) propose a project. Those approved receive funding for eight weeks of full-time research the following summer. Throughout the program, participants attend lectures, social events, and other group activities on a variety of topics. The student researchers present twice: a brief description of their project at the beginning, and a poster or talk on the results at the end. Afterwards, teams can apply for funding to present at relevant professional conferences.

The program turned out to be an excellent fit for this project. It would have been possible for Stephen (the librarian member of the team) to do some of the project alone, but the perspective of a current undergraduate student was invaluable. As part of the project, Lewis (the student researcher) did independent reading on open access as it applied to his two academic majors (Museum and Heritage Studies, Studio Art). The team presented on the project and its results at the 2018 conference of the Virginia Library Association and at OpenCon Virginia 2019.

### **Goals**

The tuition and fees currently listed on the college website do not include textbook costs.<sup>12</sup> The financial aid letters that Randolph College sends to admitted students include an estim-

ate of the cost of books and supplies, which is drawn from the national average for private, non-profit liberal arts colleges published every year by the College Board.<sup>13</sup> The researchers could not definitively say that this was not accurate, but the national average is so generalized that they wanted more specific information to see how Randolph compared.

College Board's average does not differentiate between costs for different fields of study, which can vary widely. The researchers wanted to determine the range of costs for a four-year degree in each major, which would require collecting the cost of books associated with each course. Although Randolph is small enough that this was possible, it was still a significant amount of information to collect.

As the Open Textbook Network campus leader for Randolph, Stephen encouraged and assisted faculty in adopting OER. One idea behind the research project was that concrete information on textbook costs would help demonstrate the importance of reducing those costs. Being able to tell professors the total cost of a four-year degree in their department would carry much more weight than the national average, which can be easy to dismiss if one does not think it reflects their area. Information on the most expensive disciplines and courses would show the areas that would most benefit from lowering textbook costs. This information could also potentially help students plan their finances with more realistic expectations of the textbook costs over their undergraduate career.

### **Methodology**

Many of the methods for this project were adapted from those used at community colleges in Oregon,<sup>14</sup> combined with the requirements and goals of the Summer Research Program.

1. **Readings.** These were done by Lewis over the course of the eight-week project. There were several areas of focus:
  - a. *Research on open textbooks and other OER.* The first few full days were spent on this; the primary goal was to provide context for the project.
  - b. *Specific research that inspired the project.* The remainder of the first week was spent on this, ensuring that both researchers had up-to-date knowledge of current scholarship.
  - c. *Open access in museums and art (to tie the project to the student's academic majors).* For the remaining seven weeks, Lewis spent approximately one hour each day on this. The first week's readings were assigned by Stephen, but Lewis found the subject-specific ones on his own (partly because of his own subject knowledge and partly so he could practice his research skills).
2. **Spreadsheet design.** Before collecting any data, the researchers had to decide what information was needed and how to organize it. They started with the

extremely useful *Template for Textbook Cost Estimate*.<sup>15</sup> As this did not fit their needs precisely, they adapted, cut, and added several elements. Their spreadsheet for data collection included a separate page for each subject area.

3. **Data gathering.** This was by far the most time-consuming element of the project. The researchers recorded information on every book in every course offered by the college over the previous four years. Originally, the plan was for Lewis to do all of this step, but Stephen joined in when they realized how much time it would take. They each worked on different subjects to prevent redundancy. Throughout this step, they communicated about any issues so that they were always on the same page and could resolve them as they arose. For example, some elements in the final spreadsheet were not part of the original design but were added as the researchers realized they would be relevant.
  - a. *Courses.* Using the course catalog,<sup>16</sup> the researchers recorded every course currently offered by the college. The goal was to create a realistic estimate of textbook costs for current students, so they wanted information on every course available over the previous four years (that is, anything a graduating senior might have taken). They gathered the following information about courses: number, title, most recent semester offered, and which General Education requirement (if any) the course filled.
  - b. *Textbooks.* For each course, the researchers then recorded information on every textbook required or suggested. This data came from the bookstore website and from Amazon. The researchers gathered the following information about textbooks: title; whether the book is required, recommended, or optional; maximum and minimum cost through the campus bookstore; minimum cost through Amazon; format and condition for each cost; notes; and the date the information was entered.
4. **Assessing costs.** Once they knew what individual textbooks cost, the researchers could calculate the total that students were expected to spend. For each book, and by extension for each course, there were three potential costs: high (bought new from the campus bookstore), moderate (bought used or rented, whichever was cheapest, from the campus bookstore), and low (bought used or rented from Amazon).
  - a. *General Education.* General Education (Gen Ed) requirements were a good place to start, as all students must fill them. For each requirement, the researchers looked at the costs of all courses to determine the most and least expensive options. From those numbers, they created three sample Gen Ed schedules: high (made up of the courses with the highest book cost from the campus bookstore), moderate (made up of courses with the lowest book cost from the campus bookstore), and low (made up of courses with the lowest book cost from Amazon). For the last two schedules, the cheapest course was often one that required no books and thus had a cost of \$0.
    - b. *Majors.* For each major, the researchers created a list of the required courses. For each course, they calculated the high, moderate, and low cost by adding up the textbooks used in it. This provided the cost range for the major.
    - c. *Electives.* Major requirements vary drastically, so students do not all take the same number of electives. The researchers averaged the cost of all courses to establish an average cost per credit hour that could be used for electives. This was completed for all three cost types. Moderate and low costs came out to \$0, as students could choose all of their electives from courses with no textbook costs.
    - d. *Total costs.* The researchers could now put all of the pieces together to create cost estimates for a complete degree. For each major, they created three sample schedules, which included all major and Gen Ed requirements as well as enough electives to fill the remaining credits needed for graduation.
      - i. High cost: Where there was a choice of courses, this schedule opted for the one with the most expensive textbooks. It included optional and recommended materials. Prices came from the most expensive format available in the campus bookstore.
      - ii. Moderate cost: This schedule included the least expensive courses when there was a choice. Only required materials were counted. Prices came from the least expensive option (usually rental) available in the campus bookstore.
      - iii. Low cost: This schedule had the same courses as the moderate cost (those with the lowest cost when a choice was offered). Only required materials were counted, and prices came from the least expensive format (usually used or rental) available on Amazon.

## Results

For the high option, where students take the courses with the highest cost in books and buy everything new from the campus bookstore, the cost for major requirements ranged from \$286.40 to \$3,537.25, with an average of \$1,608.91. For the

moderate option, where students take only the least expensive courses and get all books as cheaply as possible from the campus bookstore, the cost for major requirements ranged from \$37.00 to \$1,718.25, with an average of \$664.32. For the low option, where students take only the least expensive courses and purchase everything as cheaply as possible from Amazon, these costs ranged from \$26.44 to \$944.00, with an average of \$310.20 (see **Tables 1, 2, and 3**). It should be noted that majors vary widely in their credit requirements, ranging between 25 and 67 credit hours. The costs listed here are for all of the courses required for the major, not an average cost per course or credit hour.

There are any number of possible General Education schedules. The highest possible cost was \$2,910.00, the moderate was \$165.50, and the low was \$59.55. For electives, the high cost came to \$109.32 per course (see **Table 4**). This was calculated by averaging the high cost of all courses offered by the school. The moderate and low costs for electives were both \$0, as there were enough courses with no textbook costs that a student could take only those to fill their elective credits (though of course these students would be not be free to take any course they wanted).

The calculation for total cost for each major includes major requirements, Gen Ed courses, and enough electives to fill the remaining credit hours needed for graduation. The average total across all majors is \$6,099.49 for high,

\$829.82 for moderate, and \$369.75 for low. When divided by four to approximate the cost per year, total costs average \$1,524.87 for high, \$207.46 for moderate, and \$92.44 for low. The range of total cost—that is, everything needed for graduation—is \$4,528.75 to \$7,404.62 for high, \$202.50 to \$1,883.75 for moderate, and \$85.99 to \$1,003.55 for low (see **Table 5**).

**Discussion**

One of the original goals of the project was to assess whether the College Board's average yearly textbook cost per student, around \$1,200, accurately reflected the costs at Randolph College. Based on the data above, the high yearly average at Randolph is \$1,524.87, which is somewhat higher than the College Board number. It is impossible to tell from this research whether many Randolph students are actually paying that. It seems unlikely, as they would have to be taking only the most expensive courses and buying every single book in the most expensive possible format (that said, some students may do this unintentionally). The moderate and low ranges for Randolph are significantly below the College Board number, but it is similarly impossible to tell which students are choosing only the courses with the lowest cost for books. In fact, the wide range of potential costs makes it clear that any average across majors, formats, and other variables is not an accurate indication of what any one student might pay. That is not to say that the average is useless—it could be used for comparison with other schools or to look at broader patterns in textbook costs over time—but it does not demonstrate real-life costs on the individual level.

The most and least expensive majors varied based on cost model, but there were some consistencies. Some degrees were always in the top ten most expensive majors; others were always in the bottom. Others varied dramatically depending on what courses were taken and how the books were acquired. General Education and elective courses were also highly variable; while the maximum possible cost for all of the General Education requirements came to \$2,910, it was also possible to fill those requirements and spend very

**Table 1:** Cost for Major Requirements (Arts and Letters).

	High	Moderate	Low
<b>Art History</b>	\$1,577.50	\$391.25	\$259.27
<b>Classics</b>	\$1,370.58	\$346.50	\$192.97
<b>Dance (BA)</b>	\$286.40	\$59.17	\$34.75
<b>Dance (BFA)</b>	\$926.39	\$59.17	\$34.75
<b>English (Creative Writing BFA)</b>	\$1,929.11	\$654.38	\$377.74
<b>English (Creative Writing)</b>	\$1,262.86	\$642.38	\$367.93
<b>English (Literature)</b>	\$1,457.40	\$717.21	\$381.26
<b>French</b>	\$722.20	\$117.92	\$32.19
<b>History</b>	\$1,614.23	\$522.87	\$315.07
<b>Music</b>	\$2,03.25	\$1,478.25	\$895.94
<b>Music Performance (BFA)</b>	\$2,844.37	\$1,478.25	\$895.94
<b>Philosophy</b>	\$1,100.42	\$486.74	\$183.73
<b>Religious Studies</b>	\$605.35	\$231.42	\$159.89
<b>Spanish</b>	\$584.92	\$184.62	\$62.89
<b>Studio Art (BA)</b>	\$1,031.00	\$37.00	\$26.44
<b>Studio Art (BFA)</b>	\$1,670.99	\$37.00	\$26.44
<b>Theatre (BA)</b>	\$1,075.69	\$340.95	\$272.71
<b>Theatre (BFA)</b>	\$1,934.32	\$478.67	\$338.1

**Table 2:** Cost for Major Requirements (Social and Behavioral Sciences).

	High	Moderate	Low
<b>Business</b>	\$2,846.50	\$1,304.75	\$387.40
<b>Communication Studies</b>	\$1,494.25	\$305.24	\$125.49
<b>Economics</b>	\$2,745.50	\$1,293.75	\$566.20
<b>Global Studies</b>	\$1,574.20	\$1,028.21	\$362.37
<b>Liberal Studies</b>	\$1,618.49	\$689.24	\$444.24
<b>Political Science</b>	\$1,123.85	\$400.50	\$224.22
<b>Psychology</b>	\$2,130.75	\$463.75	\$273.99
<b>Sociology</b>	\$1,133.75	\$292.00	\$153.42
<b>Sport and Exercise</b>	\$1,975.00	\$944.00	\$317.86

**Table 3:** Cost for Major Requirements (Natural Sciences and Mathematics).

	High	Moderate	Low
<b>Biology (BA)</b>	\$2,132.00	\$701.75	\$219.78
<b>Biology (BS)</b>	\$3,537.25	\$1,718.25	\$826.42
<b>Chemistry (BA)</b>	\$1,320.00	\$569.00	\$595.36
<b>Chemistry (BS)</b>	\$1,522.00	\$639.00	\$620.35
<b>Engineering Physics</b>	\$2,087.25	\$1,493.00	\$217.01
<b>Environmental Studies (BA)</b>	\$1,212.45	\$518.95	\$176.11
<b>Environmental Studies (BS)</b>	\$1,502.75	\$793.50	\$209.94
<b>Mathematics (BA)</b>	\$1,231.25	\$336.75	\$128.27
<b>Mathematics (BS)</b>	\$2,350.75	\$788.00	\$162.69
<b>Museum and Heritage Studies</b>	\$1,285.00	\$176.00	\$97.04
<b>Physics (BA)</b>	\$1,478.50	\$1,109.25	\$226.58
<b>Physics (BS)</b>	\$2,274.50	\$1,697.75	\$350.98
<b>Physics Education</b>	\$1,733.25	\$1,015.75	\$237.62

**Table 4:** General Education and Electives.

	High	Moderate	Low
<b>General Education total</b>	\$2,910.00	\$165.50	\$59.55
<b>Electives (average per 3-credit course)</b>	\$109.32	\$0.00	\$0.00

**Table 5:** Total Costs.

	High	Moderate	Low
<b>Total average (all majors)</b>	\$6,099.49	\$829.82	\$369.75
<b>Total average per year (all majors)</b>	\$1,524.87	\$207.46	\$92.44
<b>Total range (all majors)</b>	\$4,528.75–\$7,404.62	\$202.50–\$1,883.75	\$85.99–\$1,003.55

little on textbooks. Similarly, elective courses could cost up to an average of \$36.44 per credit hour (\$109.32 per three-credit course), but one could also take only elective classes with no textbook costs. One takeaway from these results is that it could greatly help students to note low- or no-cost courses in the academic catalog; that way students could consider textbook costs when deciding between courses. As this is now law for public institutions in some states,<sup>17</sup> it would be reasonable for private schools to adopt the practice as well. Sharing this information would help students make informed decisions if textbook costs are an important factor in their course selections, perhaps enabling those with limited funds to spend them on major-required courses instead of electives. This is not a substitute for lowering and removing textbook costs whenever possible; that should still be the ultimate goal. It may take time, and in some cases it may never happen, so transparency about costs is an important way to help students.

This project assessed what students are *expected* to pay; it does not reflect the costs for students who share,

borrow, do without, or otherwise do not buy all of the books required by their professors. The numbers at the high and low ends of each range also do not necessarily reflect real-life student experiences. It is technically true that a student could graduate having spent only \$85.99 on textbooks for their entire college education. However, they could do so only by taking specific courses chosen for their low or nonexistent textbook costs, and by using only rented or secondhand books. That low cost is possible in only one major (Dance), and the student would be extremely limited in their choice of General Education and elective courses. The seemingly low numbers should not be used to deny the enormous burden that textbook costs place on students. On the contrary, the broad range shows that some students are limited to certain courses and disciplines, while those with more financial privilege can take anything they like. This is demonstrated by the differing costs for major requirements. Not only are students who are forced to choose courses by textbook cost limited in electives and General Education options, but some majors (and, by

extension, graduate programs and career paths) are simply not possible.

### **Limitations**

Some of the limitations of this project concerned the availability of information about course materials. Occasionally (for less than ten percent of all courses), a course listing did not include textbook information on the bookstore website, showing instead language such as “textbook information not available” or “materials available from instructor.” This was distinct from courses that had no required textbooks, which used different wording. There are a variety of explanations. Perhaps there was a conventional textbook assigned, but the professor had not put it into the bookstore website. Perhaps the professor wanted to use an openly licensed textbook or wanted to encourage students to buy an older edition to save money, in which case the bookstore would not list the information. Perhaps the course materials were in an unconventional form and could not be purchased without explanation from the professor. Whatever the explanation, the textbook costs for these courses could not be determined using the methods of this project, so the numbers are not part of the final results.

A related issue concerns courses that have no textbook but do have a cost for students that is not covered by tuition. This mainly means studio art and science lab courses, for which students must purchase specialized materials in order to participate. In this project, courses are listed as having zero cost if there is no textbook. Since open access resources would not change the cost of art or lab materials, they are in some ways irrelevant to this research. On the other hand, the cost of non-textbook materials does impact students and should be acknowledged when calculating the true cost of education.

Another element that may have affected the total costs for majors is that some required courses have prerequisites that were not listed under the major requirements. For instance, a language major might not list 100-level language courses in its requirements even if students have to take or test out of them in order to take the advanced courses needed to complete the major. This affects the total cost of the major because this research only calculates the cost of officially required courses, not their prerequisites. This may also skew the numbers for electives, as the credits required for the major are not the only ones students must take to earn it.

A limitation of the project is that textbook costs are not fixed. The low numbers were based on purchasing used books from Amazon. These costs fluctuate, so the numbers are not absolute; students may also find other alternatives for acquiring books more cheaply, such as buying directly from each other. On the other side, textbook costs increase every year, so the numbers drawn from the bookstore also change over time. This means that the data is already outdated, so any discussion of the project should mention when it was collected.

One goal of the project was to determine an accurate average cost for textbooks at Randolph. This information is

provided, but is not the main takeaway from the research. The wide ranges and different cost options mean the average may be useful for comparing with other schools when considering general textbook cost patterns, but it is probably not representative of what a particular student would be expected to pay. The differences between used and new materials and the variety of elective options make an overall average even more difficult to determine in a meaningful way. This does not mean that this type of research is not valuable; on the contrary, it demonstrates that more of it is needed to accurately assess textbook costs.

As with all research, the scope itself limits the possible applications of the data. The results do not necessarily reflect the amounts that students are actually paying, though they might be similar. The goal was to assess the range that they are being *asked* to pay, which may be quite different.

### **Future Research**

There are a number of opportunities for related research. Some of these come from the limitations created by the nature of the specific scope and timeframe; others touch on issues not addressed here.

Repeating the project at the same school would demonstrate changes over time. Replicating this project at other schools could show patterns and differences between subjects and institution types. In studies using similar methods, researchers could develop a backup method for assessing costs not shown on the bookstore site, such as contacting professors individually as needed. This project took place in the summer at a school where the teaching faculty hold nine-month contracts, so it would have been difficult or impossible to get quick responses from many of them during the research program period. Future research could include more direct communications with the faculty who assign the books.

Textbook costs varied considerably from one major to another, so it would be worth delving deeper into the specifics of particular subjects. For example, calculating prerequisites for required courses in languages would result in a more accurate assessment of textbook costs. For some subjects, adding the cost of required non-textbook materials such as art supplies or lab tools would show what students are actually asked to spend in order to take these courses. However, lowering these non-textbook costs require different approaches than those associated with textbook costs. Subject-specific research could also include surveys of students and faculty in particular disciplines to learn more about their behavior.

Other future research could delve further into student behavior. Surveys and interviews could focus on what students are actually paying and how textbook costs impact their lives, academic and otherwise. Surveys, such as the one used by Florida Virtual Campus or William and Mary<sup>18</sup>, have been shared and could be easily adapted to suit different institutions. Faculty behavior is another area of interest; surveys and interviews would show what steps they are already taking to lower textbook costs, or what barriers they find to adopting open access materials.

## Conclusion

The researchers planned this project to assess current textbook costs at Randolph College, assuming that they would come up with a single figure to compare with national averages. Instead, they learned that the textbook costs for students vary so widely that such a number does not reflect the individual experience of most students. The main goal of the project was to determine what Randolph students are expected to pay for their textbooks, and this was accomplished by showing the range of costs and the factors that impact where a given student falls within that range. These factors include discipline, course, instructor, and resource format. This means that the findings can be incorporated into discussions with faculty about OER adoption. When the total cost of textbooks for a major is shared, instructors in particularly expensive subjects may be interested in lowering the barrier to their students by adopting or creating different resources. For those in less expensive disciplines, the motivation may have more to do with the flexibility of OER than with cost savings.

This project was a good first step in determining actual textbook costs at a single school; future research will help show how that changes over time, comparable numbers at different institutions, and the effects of those costs on students.

## Data Accessibility Statement

The materials and data for the research reported here are available at <https://osf.io/ut6sp/>, DOI 10.17605/OSF.IO/UT6SP.

## Notes

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## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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