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Comptroller's Office Studies Affordability of College Course Materials

The Tennessee Comptroller's Office of Research and Education Accountability has completed a study on the affordability of course materials (e.g., print or digital textbooks, workbooks, audiovisual materials, online homework platforms, and other supplemental materials) in institutions of higher education in Tennessee.

Although the cost of course materials is only one component of the cost of a postsecondary education, by the time a student obtains a degree, the total spent on course materials can equal the cost of an additional semester of tuition at some four-year institutions. The report discusses initiatives among the state's higher education institutions to make college course materials more affordable.

In 2019, the University of Tennessee-Knoxville (UTK) surveyed nearly 2,000 Tennessee community college students. Almost half of respondents said they spent more than \$300 on course materials for the fall 2019 semester. Respondents reported that the high cost of course materials had resulted in difficult purchasing decisions that, in some cases, affected their grades or progress toward graduation. On the national level, surveys show that students at some institutions are spending less over time on course materials for reasons including a shift to digital materials and students sometimes electing not to purchase the course materials.



Efforts to create more affordable options for students in purchasing course materials are widespread across Tennessee. The Tennessee Textbook Affordability Task Force has helped decrease course material costs by creating a statewide repository for open education resources (OER). OER are online learning content such as textbooks and other digital resources created by instructors, students, and others that can be used to teach, learn, and research a subject at no cost. OER are used in some capacity on most college and university campuses in Tennessee. At UTK, for example, students are estimated to have saved over \$4 million through the use of OER since 2015.

Tennessee institutions also use inclusive access programs, which are partnerships between an institution, bookstore, and publisher to deliver digital course materials to students, below market rates, on or before the first day of class. Since 2019, the Tennessee Board of Regents has used the inclusive access model in the first phase of its Digital Engagement Initiative, saving participating students over \$23 million compared to what they would have paid to purchase new digital textbooks at the standard retail price. Five of Tennessee's nine public four-year institutions provide inclusive access programs through their bookstores.

This report was completed at the request of Representative Mike Sparks and former Senator Dolores Gresham, both of whom expressed concerns about the rising costs of textbooks.

The Comptroller's Office has included several policy options for the General Assembly in its report. These include amending state law concerning textbook policies and expanding state support for OER development and use.

To read the report, please visit the Comptroller's website at: tncot.cc/orea.

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