

College course materials: Affordability initiatives across Tennessee

September 2021

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The Tennessee Comptroller's Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) 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. Over the last several years, news reports about the affordability of course materials seem to have conflicting narratives. This report distinguishes between various estimates of the *cost* of course materials and what students actually *pay* for them, and discusses initiatives to make materials more affordable.

Key Points

Surveys of college students provide information about what students pay for course materials, the choices they make in paying for the materials, and how this affects their progress toward completing a degree.

In 2019, a survey of nearly 2,000 Tennessee community college students was conducted by the Postsecondary Education Research Center at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Almost half of respondents (48.6 percent) said they spent more than \$300 on course materials for the fall 2019 semester, with 20 percent spending over \$500. 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 students appear to be spending less on course materials. For the last few years, the National Association of College Stores (NACS) has reported continuing declines in the amount that four-year students spend on course materials. In its 2019-20 annual survey of students, NACS reported that four-year students spent an average of \$413 on course materials, down from \$415 the previous year and from \$701 in 2007-08. Reasons for the decline include a shift to digital materials and students electing not to purchase the course materials.

Efforts to create more affordable options for students in purchasing course materials are widespread across Tennessee at the system and institution levels.

In the spring of 2020, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission formed the Tennessee Textbook Affordability Task Force to find ways for Tennessee's public higher education institutions to decrease course material costs for students. One of the primary goals of the task force was the creation of 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. The state repository will allow all higher education institutions in the state to access free OER materials.

Exhibit 1: Tennessee community college student spending on course materials for fall 2019



Source: Tennessee Community College Student Course Materials Survey, 2019.

OER are used in some capacity on most college and university campuses in Tennessee. According to analysis conducted by the UTK Libraries, students at the university save an estimated \$700,000 each year through OER and zero-cost materials. Since 2015, UTK students are estimated to have saved over \$4 million. At least two Tennessee community colleges (Motlow State and Columbia State) offer or plan to offer zero-textbook-cost degree (z-degree) programs, which consist of courses taught exclusively with OER.

Tennessee institutions also utilize 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, TBR 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.

Exhibit 2: Savings realized by Tennessee community college students through inclusive access programs

Semester	Total cost with inclusive access	Retail cost of new digital books	Total savings to students
Fall 2019	\$4,330,157.86	\$10,180,991.46	\$5,850,833.60
Spring 2020	\$4,094,935.60	\$9,575,158.98	\$5,480,223.38
Fall 2020	\$5,432,700.00	\$12,449,728.00	\$7,017,028.00
Spring 2021	\$3,835,570.00	\$8,761,949.00	\$4,926,379.00
Total	\$17,693,363.46	\$40,967,827.44	\$23,274,463.68

Note: The sum of student savings is derived by deducting what students paid under inclusive access agreements for digital materials from what they would have paid for the retail cost of new digital books. If a different comparison were used that included rentals, used books, and other options, the savings would likely be lower.
 Source: Tennessee Board of Regents.

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, visit the Comptroller’s OREA website at tncot.cc/orea.