



VCU

Libraries

VCU and the Virginia Course Materials Survey

Full Report

Background

In Fall 2021, VIVA, Virginia's Academic Library Consortium, distributed the Virginia Course Materials Survey¹ to a selection of students at Virginia higher education institutions. The survey hoped to explore:

1. The relationship between educational equity and textbook costs, and
2. Which textbook features most benefited students' learning experiences.

The survey received just over 5,600 complete survey responses from 41 Virginia institutions. [VIVA's website includes a formal report of statewide findings and corresponding analysis](#), including a compelling analysis of the areas of concern, educational equity, and textbook costs.

With the help of VCU Libraries and VCU Institutional Research (IRDS), the survey was disseminated to a 20% random sample of VCU students. 603 VCU responses were received (10% response rate). Due to the IRB approved protocols and efforts to maintain respondent anonymity, VCU data is only available on the summary level. In other words, we can share how many students preferred print and how many used Pell Grants to fund their education but not how many Pell Grant awardees prefer their textbooks in print. We also cannot replicate the areas of concern analysis on the local level. Sharing on the summary levels ensures that the findings cannot be used to identify respondents or connect them to specific responses.

An overview of the demographics of VCU respondents, as well as a link to the full summary data set, is included in [Appendix 1](#) of this report. All quotes included in the report are taken from VCU students' responses to free-response questions in the survey.

Note on Comparison Data

For some questions, VCU findings are compared to two categories.

1. All (Virginia) respondents. This data includes VCU responses
2. Respondents enrolled at Virginia doctoral institutions, which does not include VCU responses. This is designated as "Doctorals, non-VCU" throughout the report. The doctoral designation is reflective of the time of survey dissemination, where the Virginia doctoral institutions were Virginia Commonwealth University, University of Virginia, Old Dominion University, George Mason University, Virginia Tech, and William and Mary.

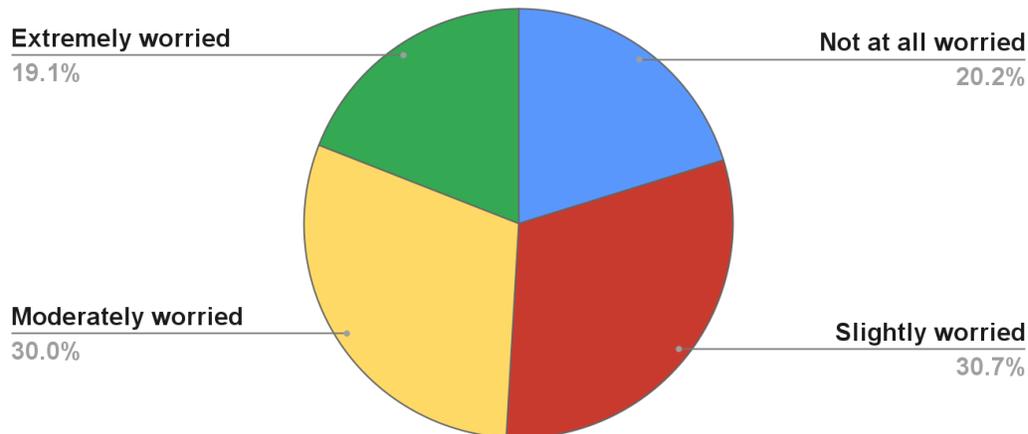
¹ The survey was developed by [a task force of librarians and assessment experts from across the state](#), including VCU's Open Educational Resources Librarian, Jessica Kirschner.

Key Findings from VCU Data

1. VCU students are worried about textbook costs more than their peers

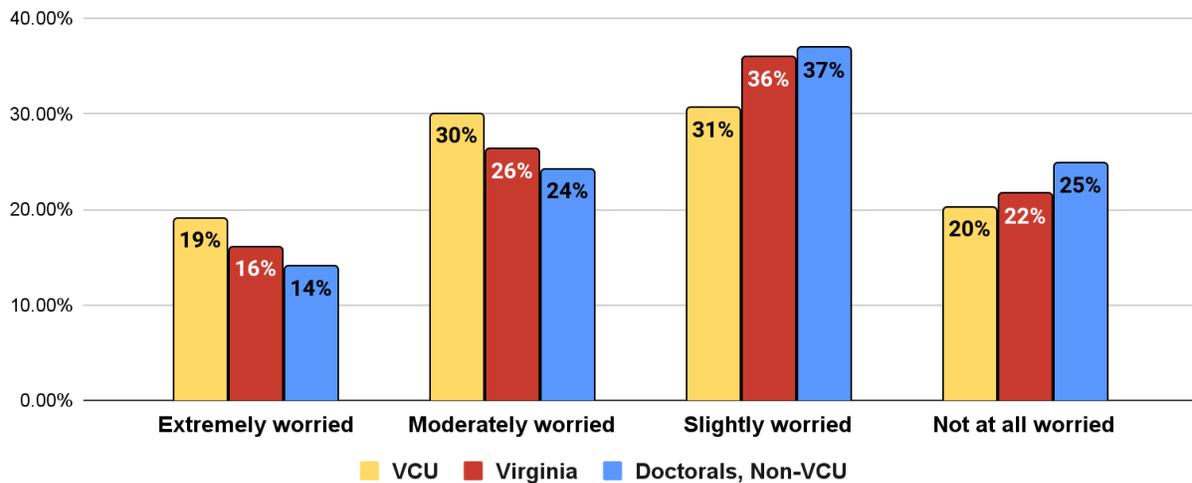
Approximately 80% of VCU students expressed some level of worry about meeting their course materials costs, with almost 20% saying they were extremely worried.

How worried were you about meeting your course material costs this semester?



These levels of worry are more severe than the level of all Virginia students (78% at all worried, 16% extremely worried) and even more so when compared to students at Virginia's non-VCU doctoral institutions (75%, 14%).

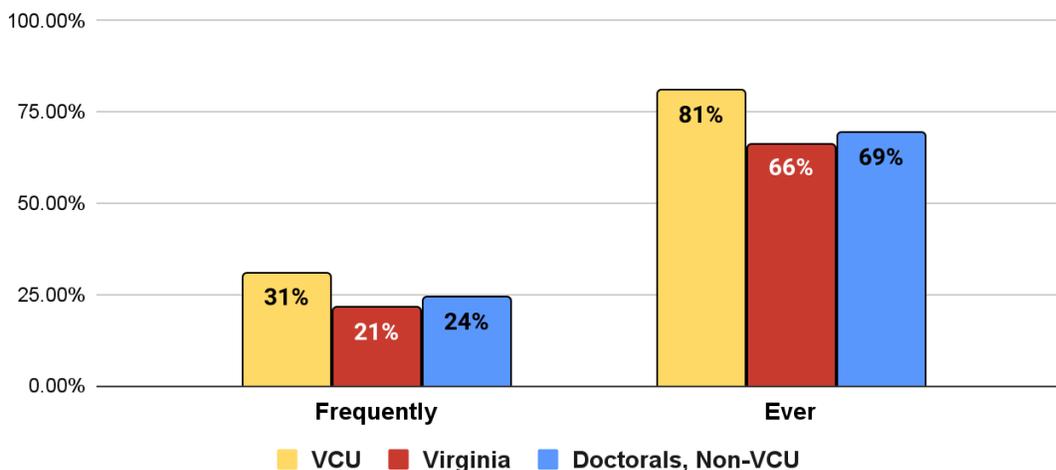
How worried were you about meeting your course material costs this semester?



2. VCU students are taking steps to reduce their textbook costs

The high cost of textbooks impacts VCU students' decisions around purchasing course materials. Most notably, students are not purchasing textbooks due to cost.

In your academic career, has the cost of required course materials caused you to not purchase the required textbook?



Virginia students' responses are in line with national averages from other surveys.² VCU students, however, are more severely impacted than their peers in the state and across the country, with over 10% more respondents (80% VCU vs 66% Virginia, 69% doctorals) indicating they did not purchase textbooks because of the cost.

Not purchasing textbooks does not always mean that students go without course materials. When asked what measures they have taken to reduce cost materials costs,

- 53% of VCU respondents said they share textbooks with friends, as compared to 44% of students at other Virginia institutions. Sharing materials was also mentioned numerous times in the free response on educational progress.
- 36% of VCU respondents said they would borrow from the library, as compared to 28% at other Virginia institutions. The library was also mentioned in the free response on educational progress.
- 84% of VCU respondents said they would find a free version online, as compared with 70% of Virginia students and 76% of non-VCU doctorals students. This option came up

² For example,

- US Public Interest Research Group (US PIRG), [Fixing the Broken Textbook Market, Third Edition](#). (September 2020). National survey, >5,000 college students. 65% indicated they did not buy textbooks because of cost.
- Florida Office of Distance Learning and Student Services. [Textbook Surveys](#). >2,000 FL students. Did not purchase texts because of cost: 2022: 53%, 2018: 64%, 2016: 67%, 2012: 64%

in the educational progress free response, as well, with some students acknowledging that some of these options may not be legal:

- "Cost hasn't hindered or benefited my educational process. It's just caused me to break the law in order to afford all my textbooks, which, if I get caught, could definitely hinder my educational process."

Students clearly place cost as the main motivator behind the decision to not purchase a book. Yet the underlying motivation appears to be more nuanced than a balancing of accounts. Free responses indicate that students may not feel the cost of the purchase is ultimately worth it, perhaps due to the projected infrequency of use in the classroom (explored further in [Other Notable Findings](#)). Students also seemed to feel forced to choose between purchasing textbooks and basic needs, such as food/groceries or rent (29 responses).

- "The cost of books can really add up especially if professors only have occasional use from the purchased materials. When responsible for other fees such as tuition, technology fees, lab fees, cost of living etc having to purchase a book may result in no book at all."
- "The costs are way too high especially for students with full course loads. Many of us give up on food or housing to afford these things. This is not only an accessibility issue, it hinders those who do not have a financial safety net, excluding an entire economic class, thus an inclusion issue."
- "Spending money on textbooks when I know that's money I'll need for tuition or for food makes it difficult for me to buy the material... Ultimately it makes me more conscious of when or what I eat, and I feel like it has affected how often I eat as well."

Such concern is echoed in other anecdotal outreach by VCU libraries.³

3. Textbook costs impact VCU students' academic performance

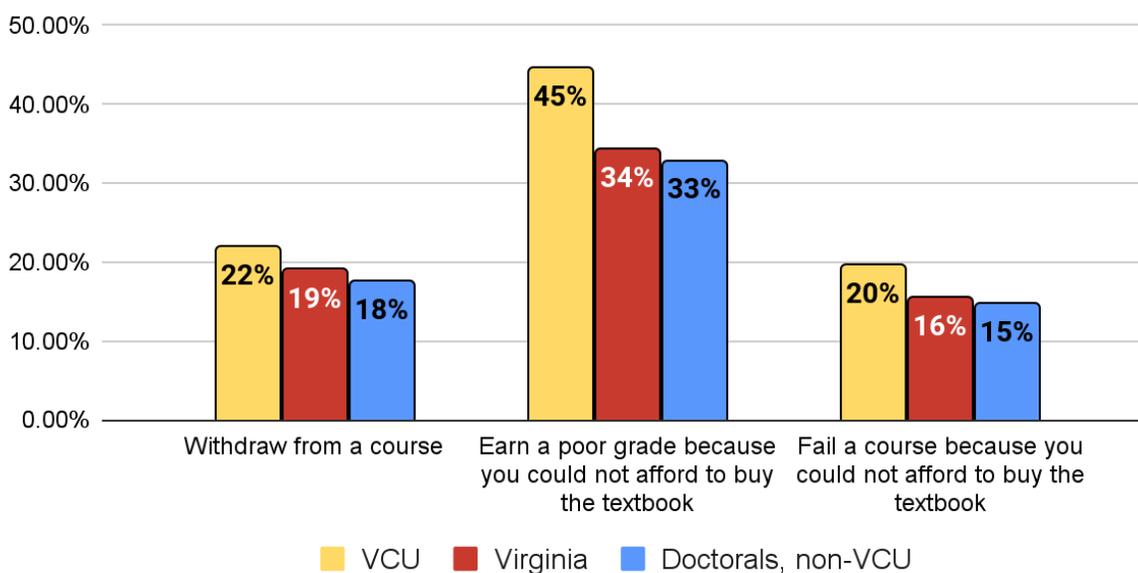
Students report textbook costs significantly impact their academic success. In the free response question on educational progress, impact on academic success (e.g. grade, ability to learn from materials) emerged as the most common theme, appearing in 55 responses (25%). This negative impact on academics is echoed throughout the survey.⁴

³ For example, watch [The Impact of Textbook Costs: VCU Student Stories](#), an interview series with VCU students released in 2021.

⁴ This negative impact on academic success is also echoed throughout the literature, perhaps notably in this Georgia study which also shows that reducing textbook costs is more impactful on students who are part-time, non-white, or Pell Grant Recipients

Colvard, N. B., Watson, C. E., & Park, H. (2018). [The Impact of Open Educational Resources on Various Student Success Metrics](#). *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 30(2), 262-276.

In your academic career, has the cost of required course materials caused you to ever...



In addition, in the free response question on educational progress, VCU students indicated that sometimes they delayed purchasing textbooks, either until they had funds or until they were sure the materials were vital to success in the course (21 responses). A slight delay in purchasing could, in turn, mean waiting weeks for the delivery of materials, significantly impacting student progress and success in a course depending on assignment or assessment due dates.

- “Over the summer I took a 5 week ECON course that required me to save up for a textbook while I worked paycheck to paycheck. I failed the class, due to having to wait then catch up in curriculum after I got the textbook.”
- “i’ve had to turn in countless late assignments as a result of needing to save up the money for the extremely expensive textbooks and access codes.”
- “It is so stressful. I often don’t buy the text and I hope that I can get by without it. Other times, I buy the text late so I can save money for bills. I have failed classes and/or did poorly because I simply could not get the textbook. “

VCU students also mentioned that textbook costs impact retention, with 6 students in the educational progress free response indicating that they considered or had taken time off from school because they could not afford textbooks in addition to tuition.

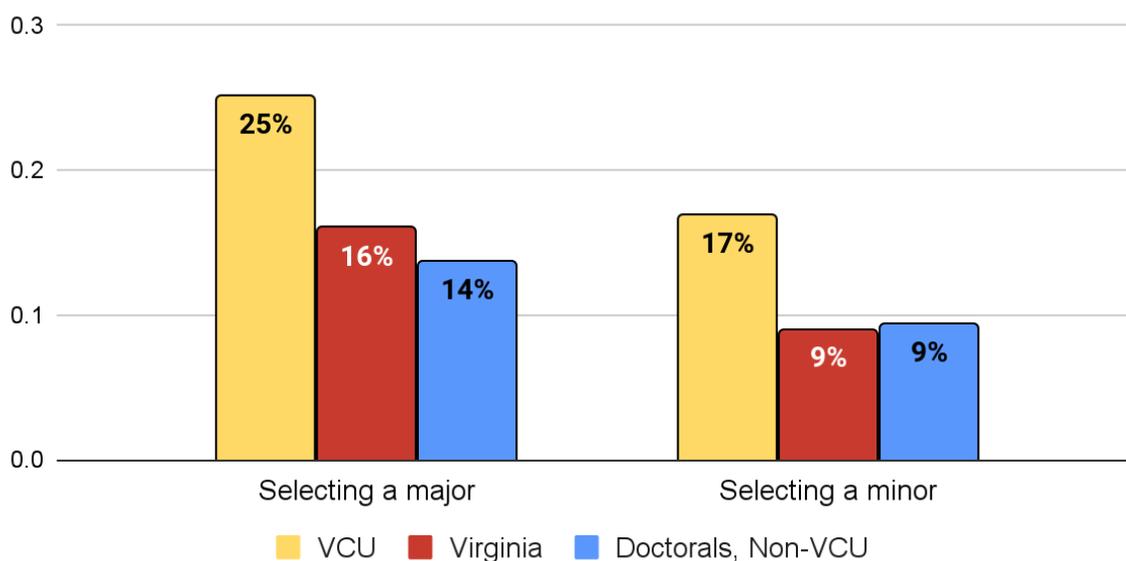
- “On top of the nearly \$1000 extra we have to pay to be in the school we also have to spend hundreds on art supplies. I am considering dropping out because it’s getting to the point I can’t afford this anymore. “
- “Purchasing the required materials for the course after paying my tuition fees have made me consider not attending college”

- “I would've been able to finish my degree faster if textbooks didn't cost so much. I had to work many hours and take a break from college to save enough money for just books.”

4. Textbook costs impact VCU students' choice of class, major, and minor

Textbook costs also impact students' major decisions, such as selecting a major or minor. This impact again seems to be more severe for VCU students than their counterparts across the state:

Have any of the following large decisions been based at all on the cost of course materials?



Selecting a class also seems to be significantly impacted by textbook costs.⁵ In the free response follow-up to the above question, half of the substantive responses mentioned an influence on course selection. It also appeared 26 times (about 10% of responses) in the free response on educational progress. Students often mentioned looking for classes that had lower or no textbook costs and/or dropping courses when they discovered the costs.

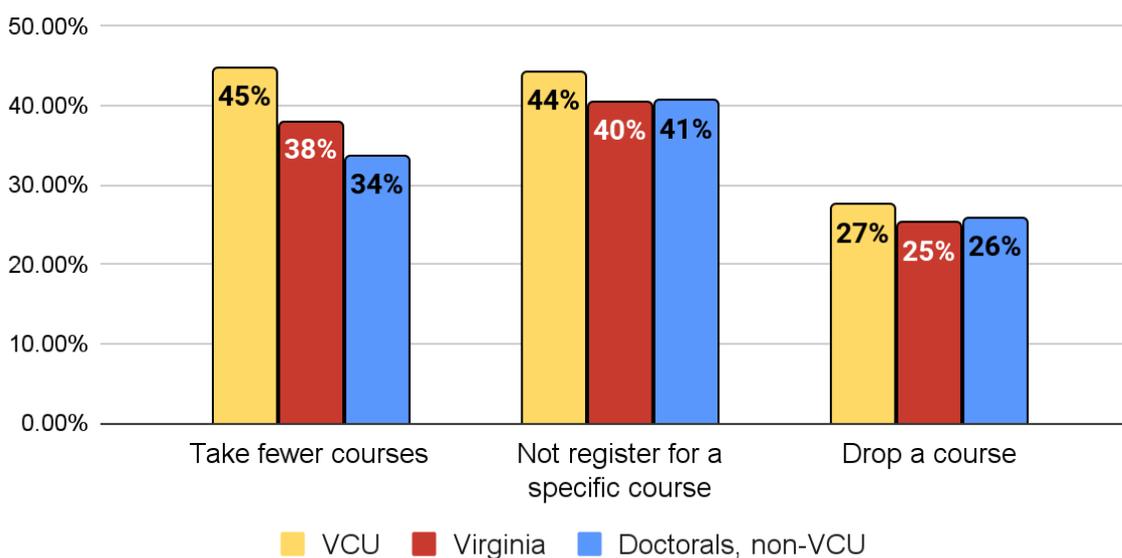
- “Usually, courses where the required texts...listed in the syllabus are numerous and above a certain amount (usually \$60 per class) are automatically put on my 'to drop' list.”
- “The cost of course materials requires me to plan out which courses I take each semester according to the price of required materials so that I know I can afford all of my books and succeed each semester. “

⁵ This is the idea behind course markings, which are required by [VA § 23.1-1308](#) and implemented at VCU through the [VCU Textbook Adoptions and Sales Policy](#). Studies, such as out of [Oregon](#), are beginning to study the impact of notifying students of low- or no-textbook cost courses at registration.

- “I could not take the courses that I had planned to take because of materials, which made me have to spend a lot of time and effort to find out substitutional courses every semester.”
- “If there's two classes and one has a free book or no required book where the other is paid, I'll almost always pick the free / not required class”

VCU students again seem to feel this impact more acutely than their peers. When asked explicitly about the impact of the cost of course materials, a higher percentage of VCU respondents indicated costs impacted how many courses they registered for, which classes they registered for, and whether they completed the course than Virginia respondents or non-VCU Doctoral institution respondents.

In your academic career, has the cost of required course materials caused you to ever...

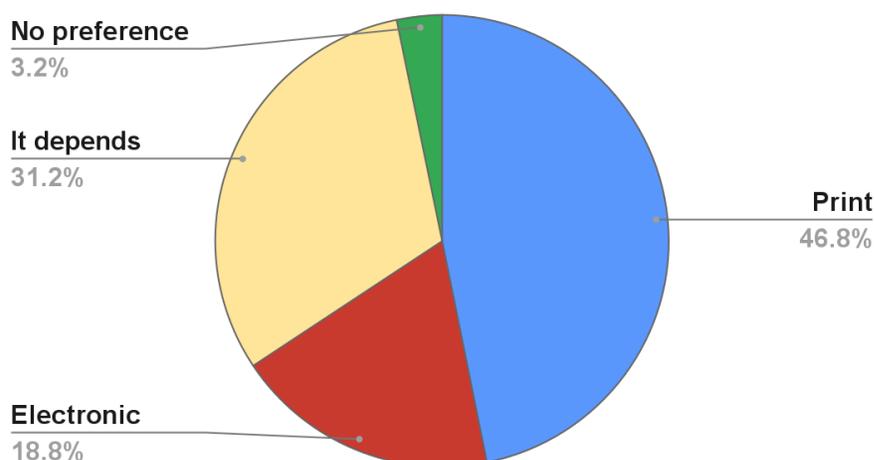


5. If cost were not an issue, VCU students would prefer print resources

Having access to a print version of the textbook seems to be a vital concern for VCU students. When asked what features were helpful to their learning, 85% of VCU students indicated “Ability to print content or access a print copy” would be helpful, with 55% of those indicating it would be very helpful. The survey did not explore how easy students believe it is to print pages, especially given the required cost to print.

In a different question exploring the format of resources in more depth, almost half of VCU students reported that, if all things are equal, they would prefer having a print textbook.

If the cost is the same, which format do you prefer for your course materials?



In the accompanying free response, additional insight into format preference was shared. VCU students expressed preference based on

- Cost, with many students expressing a preference for electronic books if they are cheaper.
- Class subject, class modality, and required use of the material. For example, students preferred electronic resources if the class was offered virtually or asynchronously and print resources if the class was offered in person.
- Homework format, preferring the textbook format to match the homework format.
- Their disability, with requirements for either print or electronic depending on the type of disability and personal learning strategy ([see Other Notable Findings](#)).

A number of themes also emerged for why students preferred each format:

Print	Electronic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ability to annotate/highlight • print is easier to read • escape from screens or electronic environment • hard copy (e.g. tangible item, no internet needed) • print better for learning • easier to focus • future use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more accessible (e.g. no weight, available anywhere via computer) • ability to search • cost (i.e. cheaper than print) • ability to annotate/highlight • online homework system • read out loud option • no future use anticipated

Interestingly, being able to annotate appeared in both lists, perhaps reflecting students' personal preferences rather than a true format advantage.

6. VCU students are concerned about accessing course materials

Throughout survey responses, a consistent trend was access: students are concerned about ensuring they have the materials necessary to succeed in their academic careers and beyond.

VCU students want to reduce barriers to obtaining and reading course materials

92% of VCU respondents indicated that ease to access was a characteristic that made a resource worthwhile to have, with 57% indicating that was very important. While this question did not explore further how students interpret “easy to access,” other questions throughout the survey seem to suggest this could be interpreted in two ways.

On the one hand, students wish materials would be easy to access because of cost. This option aligns with the high number of students not purchasing the textbook because of cost as discussed in [key finding 2](#). This focus on affordability was echoed when, in the question about textbook characteristics, 94% of VCU respondents indicated the books being “affordable or free” was important, with 68% indicating it was very important. Additionally, cost impacts format preference, with 13% of pro-electronic free response comments for the format preference question indicating the preference was correlated to cost.

Alternatively, students want to be able to easily navigate to the materials. When asked, “How helpful to your learning are the following course material features?,” 97% of VCU respondents indicated the “Ability to access them from anywhere” was helpful, with 66% saying it was very helpful. Of all options in this question, this subquestion had the highest percentage of students indicate it was very helpful, followed next by “ability to print.” These two responses could be related, as access to a print version does enable access away from a screen and/or internet access. Interestingly, though, in the format preference free response, students referenced ease of access for both the print and electronic format, with the print proponents highlighting the lack of tie to an internet connection (22 responses) and electronic proponents highlighting the omnipresence of internet connection and lack of tie to a physical object (35 responses).

- “paper copies are always accessible and easy to keep track of, while electronic copies are susceptible to being lost or unable to access due to technology issues that can always arise. When you need to study for a test or quiz, you need to know that you can easily access what you need without having to worry about a computer crash.”
- “I prefer print to have on hand in the future without having to remember a password or what software it was downloaded to.”
- “I prefer hard copies because I don't have to worry about charging my textbook, or it loading.”
- “A digital copy requires access to a computer, and that can be problematic.”
- “Electronic materials can generally be accessed anytime from anywhere from multiple devices without the need to carry heavy textbooks around.”
- “I like electronic because i will always have some type of electronic on me”
- “While I do enjoy a physical copy, they are usually cumbersome and expensive. Digital copies can all be put on my laptop and make the material more readily accessible.”

- “Electronic books are easier to access because if you leave your laptop in your room and you realize you’re out and need to do work, you can easily ask to use someone’s laptop or access the book from the library computer.”

VCU students want to be able to access resources beyond the assigned class

VCU students are not just focusing on how textbook costs impact their current classes. They are also looking at how their ability (or inability) to access the resources will impact them in the future. When asked why they would buy a book, 27% of VCU students indicated they would purchase because “I anticipate I will need them for future use.” This is in comparison to only 9% of all Virginia respondents. Conversely, only 12% of VCU students valued the ability to sell the materials after use, as compared to 41% of Virginia students. Such a differential on both responses suggests that VCU students look to future use of resources more than their peers.

This focus on future use is echoed in other areas of the survey. 85% of VCU respondents indicated that lifetime access would be a helpful learning feature, with 48% indicating that it would be very helpful. This theme also appears 5 times in the free response on the impact of costs on educational progress. For example,

“I try to rent as often as possible, but having to return my book means that I cannot refer to it in future classes. In a program that requires classes to be taken in subsequent order, the foundational topics of my early classes are not available to me in my current textbook. The financial strain also causes me a lot of distress and makes the first couple weeks of each semester extremely difficult budgeting wise.”

Students also expressed frustration with the reliance on subscription electronic resources and/or access codes, which similarly limit the resource to the semester of use.

- “Buying Pearson which isn’t even a permanent thing you pay for. It’s only for a several months which is insane”
- “It’s not possible to just buy the textbooks usually so the costs are incurred multiple times because they insist on an online version that functions as a subscription.”
- “It makes it extremely hard on me and my family when I need to purchase a \$300 textbook for a class such as Spanish. I don’t even get access to it after the semester is over which is ridiculous.”

Other notable findings from VCU Data

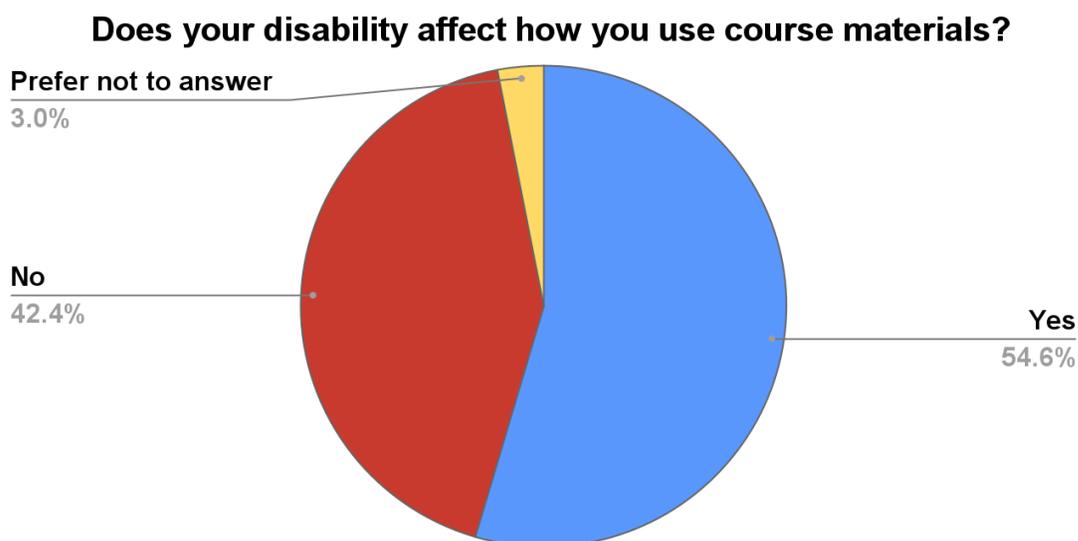
Disabilities impact how VCU students use course materials

As mentioned in [the exploration of format preference](#), some students prefer a certain format based on how their disability. For example,

- “I have dyslexia so often it is very important that I have a print copy.”
- “I have carpal tunnel syndrome, which is exacerbated when I use a computer keyboard, so I prefer to use a print copy when possible and affordable.”

- “I have ADHD and my auditory attention is better. I like electronic versions because I can use text to speech apps.”

The survey also asked those who indicated they had a disability (11% of respondents) whether it would impact their use of course materials, and a majority indicated that it would.



VCU students prefer when textbooks are used in class--and feel cheated when they're not

Another common theme throughout the VCU responses was the focus on the use of the resources in class. While students are rarely happy with the costs of their textbooks, they at least felt justified in spending the money when the resources were central to their success in the course. When asked “How important are the following characteristics that made [course materials] worthwhile to have?”

- 87% of VCU students indicated that the resources being “Actively used throughout the course” was important, with 48% indicating it was very important
- 84% of VCU students indicated that it was important for the resource to be “Essential to successful completion of the course,” with 44% indicating it was very important.

The theme was also echoed in the free response on educational progress, with 10% of all responses mentioning frustration when a book was not used in class.

- “Many courses say a certain textbook is required that costs hundreds of dollars but then the textbook is never used, or used once and seems a waste of hundreds of dollars. Or the textbook is heavily used more than the in class learning content and there seems to be almost a disconnect between what is taught in class like a waste of time versus you could just read the textbook and do better.”
- “Usually the cost of course materials vs the actual infrequent use of the text/material has led me to believe that buying the "required" material is unnecessary or better money

spent if split with a peer. It just ends up not being worth it and I feel like I make the same amount of progress without the "required" material that I would if I had bought it (or rented).”

- “I have had to rent several used textbooks that weren't much cheaper than the new ones because a professor wanted us to read five pages of it. That's a waste of money and unfair to struggling students”

VCU students are frustrated by the textbook industry

Throughout the free response sections, it becomes clear that VCU students understand the inequities of the current textbook market and are frustrated that they are forced to engage in that market to succeed in their class. These frustrations are widespread and include:

- Frustration when professors assign their own textbooks for large costs
 - “my school also likes for us to buy books made by our professors at times so there's no way around buying it!”
 - “A lot of these costs are unnecessary add ons that the professors make money off of. Many of them are needed to complete the class work and if you don't buy them you will fail the class. It feels like a barrier and I cant imagine how upsetting it is for people who are barely making ends meet.”
- Frustration at the reliance on access codes, which not only allow limited access to books but also require payment to complete homework.
 - “The amount of texts books and access codes required have caused large amount of stress because certain classes require paying a premium for online access codes just to submit work otherwise you will fail”
 - “literally the pdf of the textbook is FREE ONLINE and yet we still have to pay 120 for mindtap per semester just so we can DO READING QUIZZES????”
- Frustration at the frequent release of new editions. While few changes seem to occur between editions, the new one is required to ensure alignment with the course and homework.
 - “The cost of textbooks keeps increasing every year, while the content of the books does not change. These publishing companies change the cover of the textbook and the introduction story of the chapter and call it a new version. This is totally unfair to students.”
 - “Sometimes when I don't have the latest edition book in a course, it makes learning the material and studying for exams harder. I often have to just deal with these issues because I can't afford to buy the newest edition of every textbook and course materials for every class.”
 - “Well, its annoying that classes require you to be the newest version of a textbook.... when the version from last year, for example, would be \$60 but the newest one is \$300...”

Appendix 1: VCU Data

All data supporting the findings in this report can be found on [a downloadable Excel sheet](#).

Data is summary only, due to IRB restrictions, and presented as percentages. Some questions also include percentages for all Virginia respondents (includes VCU responses) and Virginia doctoral institutions (does not include VCU responses). The latter is reflective of designation at the time of survey dissemination (VCU, UVA, ODU, GMU, Virginia Tech, and William and Mary).

Demographic data

Student demographic data was vital to VIVA's exploration of the relationship between textbook costs and educational equity. [In their report](#), this importance emerged primarily through their analysis of "areas of concern." They define these areas as:

- Using Pell Grant funding to fund the respondent's education (a proxy for low-socio-economic class per other similar studies)
- Using education loans to fund the respondent's education
- Using a full time job to fund the respondent's education
- Race/ethnicity other than or in addition to white (defined by VIVA as Non-White-Only)
- First Generation student
- Currently taking care of children, parents, or other family members, and
- Having a disability

VIVA's results show that those students with areas of concern more severely feel the impact of textbook costs, echoing other studies in the field. The impact also increases when students have more than one area of concern.

While we cannot present that granular analysis for VCU due to the IRB approved protocols, demographic data can still place VCU responses in the context of these areas of concern. For example, the large number of first-generation and/or non-white students could place the higher levels of worry about cost in context. Breakdowns of VCU demographics are included with the full VCU dataset, and we include it here for more immediate context.

Degree Respondents are currently pursuing

Bachelors	60.53%
Masters	18.24%
Doctorate	17.41%
Other (e.g. non-degree seeking)	3.82%

Undergraduate academic level

Freshman	18.90%
Sophomore	20.27%
Junior	27.40%
Senior	32.88%
I don't know	0.55%

Race/Ethnicity

American Indian or Alaskan	1.04%
Asian or Pacific Islander	18.45%
Black	13.69%
Hispanic	10.12%
Multi-Race	4.61%
White	45.09%
Another race or ethnicity not listed here	2.53%
Prefer not to answer	4.46%

Areas of concern

Do you identify as a...

First Gen Student (defined here as having no parent or guardian who completed at least an Associate's degree or higher)	36.39%
Caretaker (currently taking care of children, parents, or other family members)	15.38%
International Student	3.65%
DACA Student	0.00%
Part Time Student	13.12%
Full Time Student	81.73%

Funding Source (selected)

Pell Grant program	11.78%
Education loans	19.19%
Part-time job(s)	18.07%
Full-time job(s)	8.30%

Appendix 2: How VCU Helps

Established in 2016, [VCU Libraries' Open and Affordable Course Content Initiative](#) supports instructors as they work to transition their courses to zero textbook cost courses, using either [library content](#) or [open educational resources \(OER\)](#).

The initiative helps faculty:

- **Find** and **evaluate** open, no-cost, or library materials for use in courses..
- **Create** and **share** original works, customized resources, or ancillaries like test banks.
- **Assess** students' perception of materials and the impact on their performance.

To help with the transition to zero textbook costs, we provide assistance through

- One-on-one consultations (finding materials, evaluating ebook licenses, and more)
- Workshops/meetings
- Publishing support
- Collections/purchasing
- A grant program, the [Affordable Course Content Awards](#), which provides financial and project management support to faculty awardees
- Partnership with VIVA for collections purchasing and [the VIVA Open Grant program](#)

Additional information is available at go.vcu.edu/textbooksavings.

Appendix 3: Links

This report presents all in-text links as hyperlinks for accessibility purposes. This appendix lists the links contained in this report for those who may be reading a print version. Internal links to other sections of the report are not included here.

VCU Libraries' Open and Affordable Course Content Initiative: <http://go.vcu.edu/textbooksavings>

Full Report: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/oacc/15/>

Background

VIVA survey website: <https://vivalib.org/va/open/survey>

Footnote 1: VIVA Task Force: <https://vivalib.org/va/open/survey-task-force>

Key Finding 2

Footnote 2:

- Fixing the Broken Textbook Market:
<https://uspirg.org/blogs/blog/usp/fixing-broken-textbook-market-third-edition>
- Florida Textbook Surveys:
<https://dlss.flvc.org/colleges-and-universities/research/textbooks>

Footnote 3: Impact of Textbook Costs video series:

https://vcu.mediaspace.kaltura.com/playlist/dedicated/238854143/1_2zi1c7ii/

Key Finding 3

Footnote 4: Covard, Watson, and Park (2018): <https://www.isetl.org/ijtlhe/pdf/IJTLHE3386.pdf>

Key Finding 4

Footnote 5:

- VA § 23.1-130: <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title23.1/chapter13/section23.1-1308/>
- VCU Textbook Adoptions and Sales Policy:
<https://vcu.public.doctract.com/doctract/documentportal/08DA32A740D32DAC38DEC1E64B9AFBE1>
- Oregon study of course markings: <https://sched.co/1AmX9>

Appendix 1

Data: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/oacc/15/>

Appendix 2

VCU Libraries' Open and Affordable Course Content Initiative: <http://go.vcu.edu/textbooksavings>

Library Content: <https://guides.library.vcu.edu/oacc-library>

Open Education Resources: <https://guides.library.vcu.edu/oer>

Affordable Course Content Awards: <http://guides.library.vcu.edu/acca>

VIVA Open Grant Program: <https://vivalib.org/va/open/grants>