
BE BOOK SMART!

2020/21 REPORT

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The Be Book Smart Fair is a yearly event put on by the Vice President Academic of the University of Alberta Students' Union. This event aims to increase awareness of ways to save students money on textbooks, as well as showcase to the university community the barriers that high cost textbooks create to successful learning.

One of the main solutions raised by the Be Book Smart Fair is the idea of a move to Open Education. Open Education encompasses resources, tools and practices that are free of legal, financial and technical barriers and can be fully used, shared and adapted in the digital environment. Of particular interest in the discussion of textbook affordability are Open Educational Resources (OER). OER serves a similar purpose to textbooks but offers a considerably higher amount of flexibility and adaptability due to their open licensing. This allows students to access these materials free of charge, and for professors to freely "remix" existing OER to better suit the needs of their class.

Discussions around Open Education and OER have broadened at the University of Alberta since the last Be Book Smart Report; however, awareness of these materials still poses a barrier to their adoption. The work of on campus champions such as the Libraries, the Center for Teaching and Learning, a many passionate professors have been instrumental in increasing awareness.

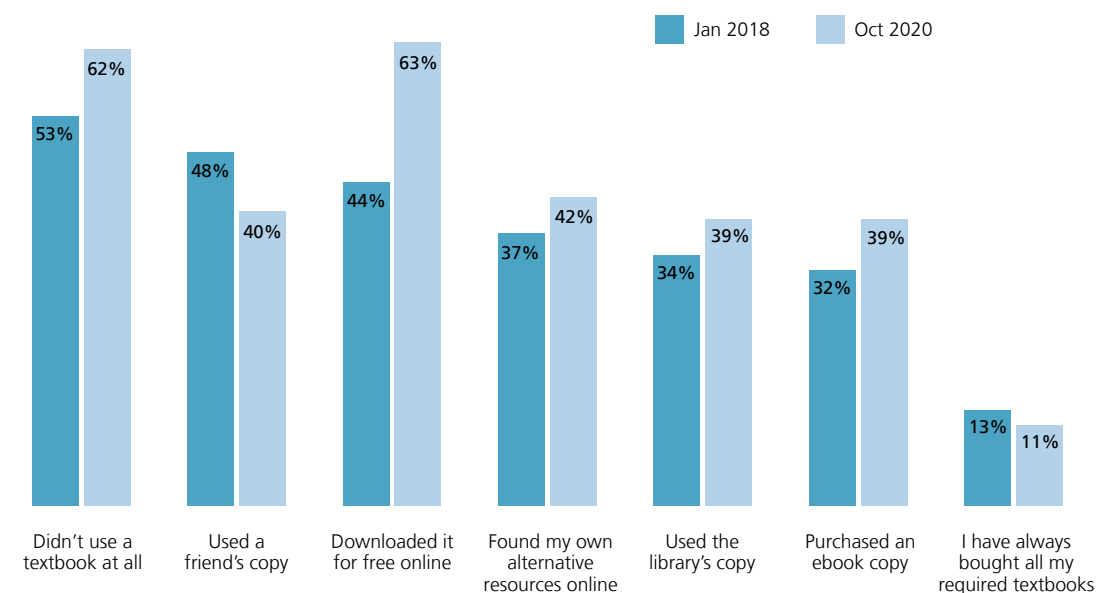
For the purpose of this report it is also important to note the current state of Open Education Initiatives at the university of Alberta. Building off the work of many passionate advocates over the past few years, the Students' Union was able to provide a compelling and comprehensive case for the piloting of a specific initiative at the University of Alberta to reduce textbook costs. This initiative is called "Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) signifiers." During the enrollment process, ZTC signifiers highlight courses that have no associated textbook costs. The University of Alberta has publicly stated that it will be pursuing this program for the fall 2021 semester. This initiation of a ZTC program is vital in the fight towards affordability as a comparator institution in BC, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, has saved their student body over 2 million dollars between the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and the end of the Fall 2020 semester. Simultaneously, research has shown that the existence of a ZTC program facilitates broader reductions in academic material costs, as demand for ZTC designated courses significantly outweighs the sections without the designation, incentivising professors to meet the designation.

KEY FINDINGS

In the 2020/2021 academic year, the Be Book Smart Fair transitioned from an in person fair to a series of online lunchtime talks. These talks included representatives from the University of Alberta Libraries, Professors at the University of Alberta, and globally recognized Open Education Advocates. Simultaneously, various surveys about academic resources were conducted through the UASU Perks platform. The data was then compared with the data collected for the 2018 Be Book Smart report. The key findings from those surveys are outlined below.

- Since 2018, the likelihood that students will use alternative strategies to obtain textbooks rather than purchasing them has increased.
- The most popular strategy to mitigate cost is to find a free online copy of the textbook, with 63% of students in 2020 using this method. Close behind in second place is 62% of students not using the textbook at all.
- Since January 2018, the amount of students claiming to “have always bought all my required textbooks” has dropped to 11%. This means that 89% of students have forgone purchasing a textbook during their degree.
- Overall, the cost of textbooks per semester seems to have decreased slightly since January 2018. In 2018, 16% of students paid between \$0-\$100 per semester, in 2020 26% of students paid \$0-\$100. However the amount of students paying \$100-\$250, \$500-\$750, \$750-\$1000, and \$1000+ remained relatively stagnant.
 - It is unclear as of yet if this reduction in cost is associated with the transition to remote learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- In 2018 76% of students had chosen not to buy a textbook purely due to the cost. In 2020, that number increased to 81%, with 41% of respondents stating this was a frequent occurrence.
- The impact of textbook prices on student success has remained relatively similar save for a couple positive changes. The percentage of students who had to choose between food and other monthly expenses or textbooks dropped to 8% from 18%. Similarly, the amount of respondents saying the cost of instructional materials has not impacted their success increased from 23%-34%. Notably that means that 66% of respondents have their success at the University of Alberta impacted by instructional materials.

COPING STRATEGIES

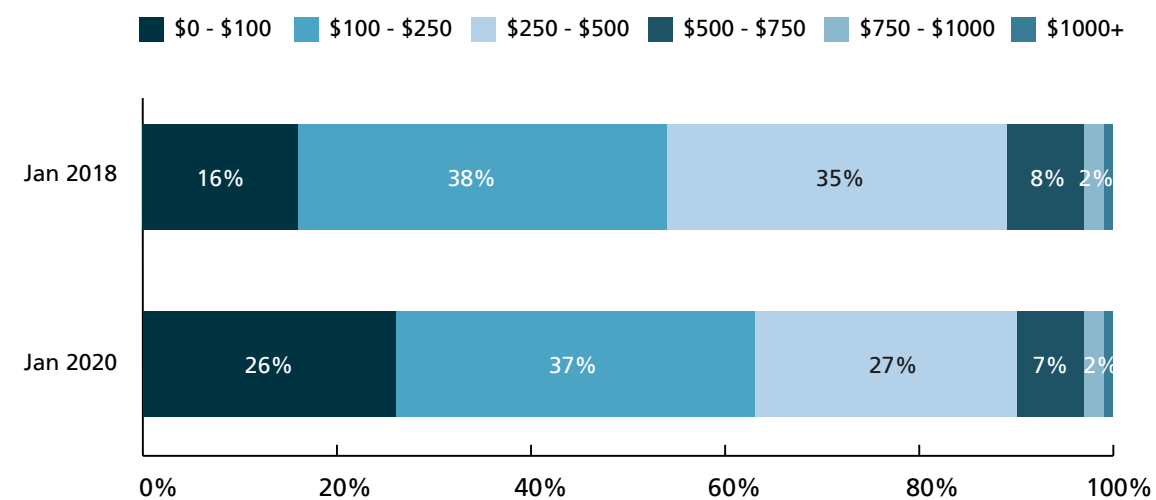


“Have you ever done the following INSTEAD of buying a textbook?” (Choose all that apply.)

A staggering 89% of students have used some form of coping mechanism to mitigate their textbook costs. The only strategy which has not seen an increase in use since 2018 was the option of “used a friend’s copy” which may be a result of the decreased in person social interaction due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the transition to remote learning. The strategy which saw the most significant increase was “download(ing textbooks) for free online.” The increased prevalence of this strategy should be concerning, as the process of downloading copyrighted content for free online is legally dubious, the process does also pose risk to the student as viruses or malware may come part and parcel with their courseware. The 19% increase in the use of this strategy should be quite concerning to the university of alberta due to the associated risks and liabilities.

It is important to note that the amount of individuals who have always purchased all required textbooks has dropped. With 11% of students always buying textbooks, the inverse is staggering. 89% of students have at some point forgone the purchasing of a textbook for their courses. Regardless of the reasoning behind not purchasing the required textbook that number should be a wake up call to this university. Students are en masse forgoing the use of academic materials – this may have impacts on academic performance, but even if it doesn’t, it should put in question the pedagogical benefits of textbook use.

COST OF TEXTBOOKS



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

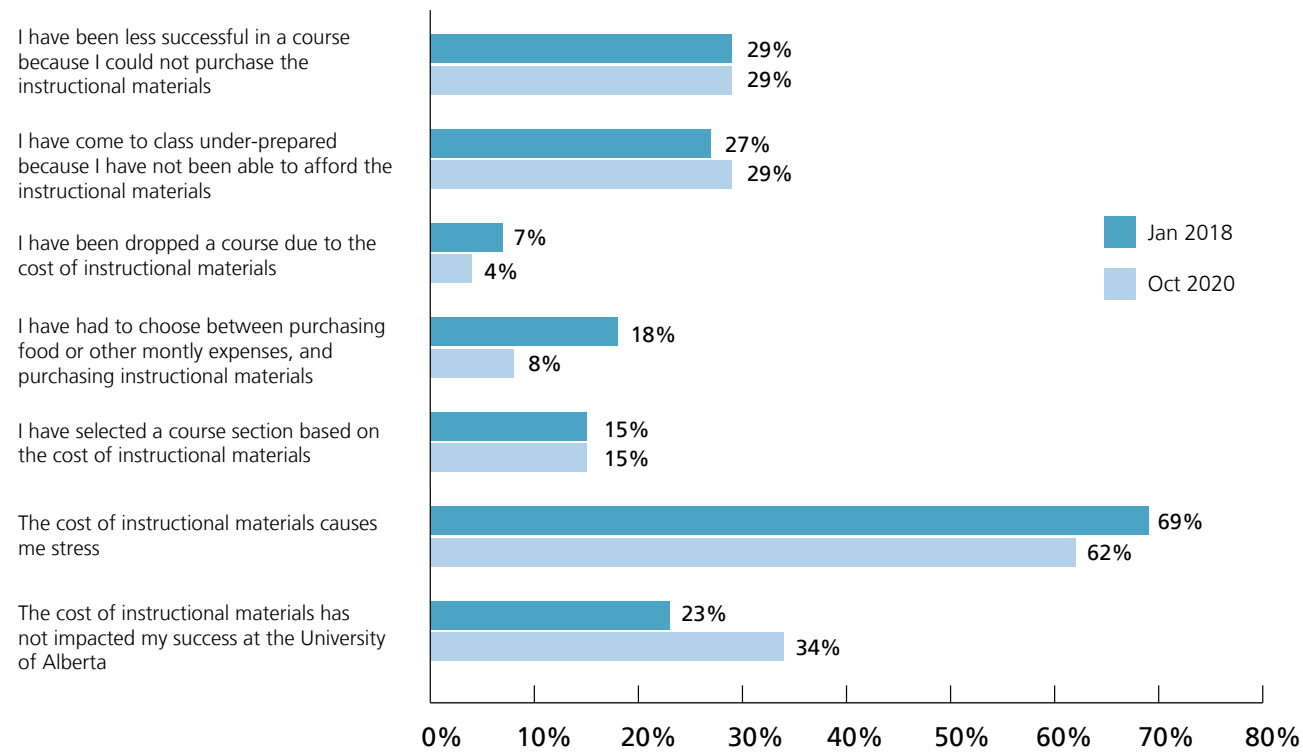
Compared to January 2018, the total amount of students spending between \$0-\$100 has increased by 10%. This is quite significant; however, we are unsure if this is a trend, or if the 2020 academic year is an outlier due to the transition towards remote learning. Notably, on their “Support for Remote Teaching” page, the Center for Teaching and Learning explicitly mentions the use of OER as a strategy for success when teaching remotely. Anecdotally, the University of Alberta Libraries have said they have received increased questions about the use of OERs in advance of the Fall 2020 semester.

Outside of the \$0-\$100 block, the \$100-\$250, \$750-\$1000, and \$1,000+ blocks all remained relatively consistent since 2018. The \$500-\$750 block had the largest reduction, falling from 35%-27%.

The 2018 Be Book Smart Report showed that a student can expect to pay 15% of their total educational costs purely on textbooks. Although no year-based demographic data was collected for this survey, previous iterations of the Be Book Smart Fair have shown that the highest burden of textbook costs typically fall on first year students. This phenomena is most likely due to first year courses typically requiring an expensive textbook while, simultaneously, first year students may be less likely to be aware of various strategies to mitigate textbook cost. With that in mind, targeted information in orientation around saving money on textbooks for first year students may be a very effective way to curb much of the cost.

A recommendation for the next Be Book Smart Report would be to return to gathering year-based data for textbook costs in order to keep track of these trends.

IMPACTS ON STUDENT SUCCESS



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

The chart above outlines the impact the cost of academic materials has had on students in a few key ways. Although many of the impacts have remained relatively stable since 2018, a few changes exist around the topics of food insecurity, stress, and success. In 2018, 18% of students said they had to choose between purchasing food or other monthly expenses and purchasing instructional materials, while in 2020 that number dropped to 8%. This is an interesting change as a different UASU survey elucidates that almost 25% of students skip meals at least once a month due to the cost of food, with 15% skipping meals at least once a week. With that information in mind, I would hypothesize that the drop in the percentage of students forced to choose between monthly expenses and instructional materials may arise from three specific items. First the decrease may be attributed to an overall normalization of food insecurity on campus. Secondly it

may be attributed in part to the slight decrease in textbook costs across campus, with more students in the \$0-\$100 range for semesterly textbook costs. Third, with the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic many students have returned to their family homes, this may factor in to reduced precarity for certain students, however it may have led to increased precariousness for other.

Although the percentage of students who experience stress due to the cost of academic materials has fallen from 69% to 62%, this number should still remain quite concerning. With students still overwhelmingly stressed with textbook costs, this should be a clear area of focus for the University of Alberta, should they ever wish to claim compassion and understanding towards students.

PROGRESS TOWARDS AFFORDABLE LEARNING MATERIALS

Since the previous Be Book Smart Report there has been considerable progress in the fight for affordable learning materials at the University of Alberta. A few of the key areas of progress are outlined below.

ZERO TEXTBOOK COST SIGNIFIER PILOT PROGRAM

In response to advocacy efforts from the UASU, the University of Alberta has begun work on a Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) signifier pilot program. This program would add the ability to designate a course in beartracks as “ZTC” in order to showcase if a course has an associated textbook cost. Although this may at first glance seem relatively small of a change, a similar program at Kwantlen Polytechnic University saved students \$2 million between the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and December 2020. With 15% of students saying they chose courses specifically due to associated academic materials cost, this should prove considerably useful to streamline the enrollment process. Similarly, with nearly 30% of students feeling unprepared, or less successful due to textbook costs, the ability to choose their courses with this additional information should prove to have tangible positive effects on their success in university. This pilot program is set to begin in the Fall 2021 semester; however, the full scope of the pilot has yet to be fully determined. It is our hope that this pilot will operate on an opt-in pan-campus manor rather than being limited to adoption in specific faculties.

THE CREATION OF A NEW UASU OPEN EDUCATION POLICY

This year the UASU Policy Committee undertook efforts to draft the first ever UASU Open Education Policy. This policy spans discussions of OER, Open Research and Open Data. It also includes advocacy points to the university, provincial government, and federal government. This policy will guide the UASU’s advocacy around Open Education for years to come and serves as a testament to the UASU’s commitment to Open Education. In the past the only mention of Open Education was limited to the Academic Materials Policy. By creating a separate Open Education Policy, we are able to talk about broader issues and broaden the scope away from purely university centered advocacy. This policy also serves as a fantastic primer to the topics of Open Education. Should you be interested in learning more, I highly suggest reading it and its various citations.

ADDITION OF OER IN THE TRANSITION TO ONLINE LEARNING GUIDE

Over the spring/summer semesters, the UASU VP-A was involved with the University’s Public Health Response Team Academic Impacts Subcommittee (PHRT-AISC). One of the roles of the PHRT-AISC was to aid in the development of the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL)’s Support for Remote Teaching Page. The VP-A successfully pushed for information about Open Educational Resources to be added to this page. Between the formal publishing of the Support for Remote Teaching page and September 30th 2020, the page had received over 27,000 unique hits. Although there is no firm data on the total usage of OER by faculty during the 2020/2021 academic year, the visibility of OER may have played a significant role in the reductions in textbook costs this year.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONTINUED ADVOCACY

Although there have been significant steps made towards affordable academic materials, there is still more work to be done. The following are suggestions for future advocacy priorities, encompassing both new items as well as continuations of existing projects.

To continue meaningful change towards affordable textbooks, I recommend the following action.

- Push to expand the ZTC pilot program and have it set as a full scale initiative. Once the pilot designation is removed and this becomes a clear standard student savings will be insulated
- Continue events such as the Be Book Smart fair in order to increase awareness of how to save money on academic materials
- Support new events on campus such as the Open Education Symposium which also aim to increase awareness of Open Education.
- Continue provincial advocacy around the creation of a provincial office of Open Education, similar to BC Campus or E-Campus Ontario. These services have been proven to be fantastic investments for the provinces they exist within.

Additional areas for advocacy to prioritize

- Push for increased culturally relevant and inclusive academic materials.
- Push for opportunities for undergraduate students to gain professional development around Copyright and licensing
- Advocate for local University of Alberta Journals to openly license the work they publish.
- Advocate for the creation of teaching awards which highlight champions of Open Education.

The above list is deliberately non-exhaustive. One of the main benefits of Open Education is the ability for it to grow and evolve at a faster pace. By the time of publication for the next Be Book Smart Report many of these strategies may be completed and many new strategies will have emerged. With that in mind, above all else I recommend maintaining a strong involvement in the Open Education community in order to stay consistently up to speed with best practices in Open Education. By maintaining involvement in the broader community we are better able to study successful programs as well as collaborate with other advocates.

CONCLUSION

The report above outlines new data around student experiences with academic materials, discusses current initiatives, and highlights areas for continued advocacy. As a whole this report should be taken as a testament to successful advocacy over multiple years, but it should also be taken as a warning sign to the university. Although steps are being made towards a fulsome solution, students are still facing issues of affordability and access right now. Seeing that 89% of students forego buying textbooks should be alarming, as it is a clear sign that current pedagogical strategies are not meeting the needs of learners.

Although this specific report focused primarily on the cost of textbooks and the impact that cost has on students, for future years I suggest also critically analyzing the norms those textbooks reproduce. OER are the affordable option; however, just as importantly they are the accessible option and the adaptable option. OER can be a very strong tool to increase visibility of equity seeking groups in education and allow professors the flexibility to teach to their context rather than just the hegemonic norms. Similarly, OER have considerable accessibility features that can level the playing field for many students with accommodations. With increased accessibility to E-Readers, the ability to embed audio, video, or activities, and the ability to update on the fly to help students OER represent a significant improvement to accessibility in our classrooms. Although previous initiatives have focused on affordability, conversations around accessibility and equity have not been absent; however, going forward it is important to ensure that equity and accessibility are at the forefront of discussions around academic materials.

It is important to acknowledge that this report is the product of many passionate advocates and many years of research. Thank you to everyone who has contributed to this report as well as the progress of Open Education on the University of Alberta Campus. I would like to specifically thank Jon Olfert for the survey data referenced in this report. Finally I would also like to sincerely thank Akanksha Bhatnagar for first introducing me to the concept of Open Education and setting up many of the structures and relationships that made it possible to start the new initiatives from this year.

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