

# Estimating What the Academic Materials Program Would Have Cost

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*Prepared for UASU Executive Committee by  
Department of Research and Advocacy*



## Overview

This briefing attempts to project the additional cost to students that would have been incurred in 2024/25 if the Academic Materials Program (AMP) proposal had not been cancelled based on student and staff consultations.

Self-reported and inflation-adjusted textbook expense data, ZTC participation rates, opt-out rates in a similar program, and potential cost ranges shared in consultation sessions all contributed to our estimate. It seems clear that AMP's implementation would have cost 2024/25's participating undergraduate students at least \$6.8 million more than they will likely pay for textbooks, with projections ranging from \$2.7 million to \$12.9 million.

## Context

In 2023/24, University of Alberta Facilities and Operations began consultation on establishing a form of [automatic textbook billing program](#) called the Academic Materials Program (AMP), originally labeled 'Equitable Access.' The University held consultations with Students' Council, the Council of Faculty Associations, and University staff. Meanwhile, the UASU also consulted with librarians, subject matter experts, and academic leaders at an institution with a similar program. Student leaders and community members raised concerns about AMP, and ultimately decided to oppose it. The fee proposal, which was expected to get Board approval in Winter 2024 and be implemented in Fall 2024 outside of normal fee negotiation structures, did not go forward.

At time of writing, the University has signalled that it intends to bring forward a different automatic textbook billing proposal, and student leaders have determined to examine it on its merits when details are available. This briefing is specific to the additional cost to participating students if the original proposal, AMP, had been implemented for 2024/25.

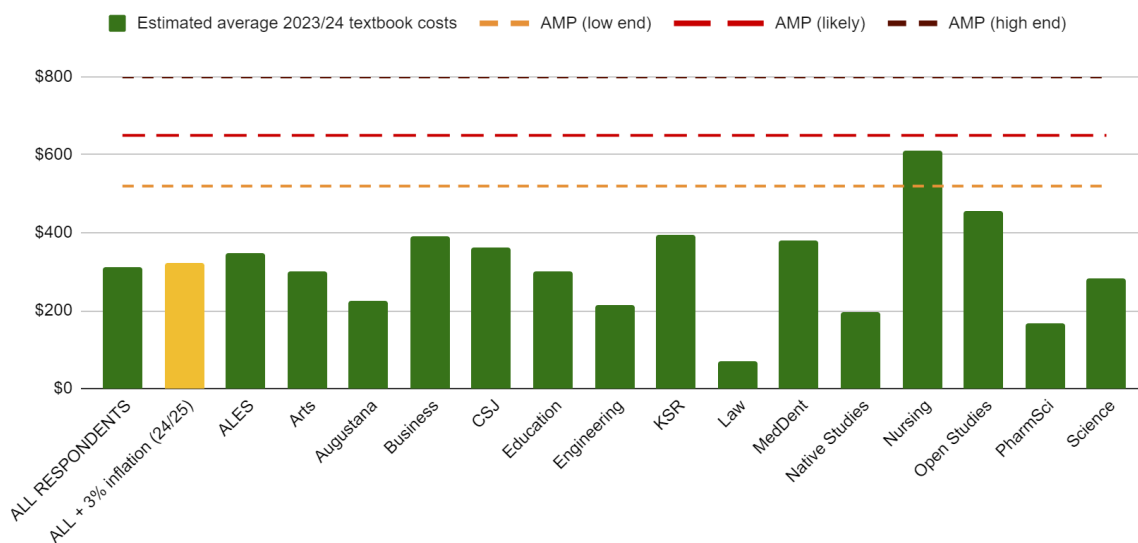
## Estimating the AMP Fee

While an exact cost for AMP could not be provided, as it would depend on negotiations with textbook manufacturers, the University [informed](#) Students' Council that similar programs cost roughly \$260-400 CAD per semester, or \$520-800 per year. Based on discussions, the cost would more likely fall between \$600 and \$700, so \$650 (\$325 per semester) is a probable midrange case.

## Estimating 2024/25 Textbook Costs

The [2023 Annual Survey](#) provided average self-reported textbook expenses for Fall Semester. The survey (n=2,668) took place roughly 2-2.5 months after textbook purchasing. The average student paid \$174 for textbooks in Fall 2023. Since [ZTC](#) uptake was higher in Winter Semester, and Alberta CPI rose by 3%, we approximated two semesters of 2024/25 textbook costs as (2023 Fall rate + (0.8x 2023 Fall rate))\*1.03. The average student will pay around \$323 for textbooks in Fall 2023/Winter 2024, which means that the midrange estimate for AMP would have doubled their textbook costs. Crucially, students also retained full autonomy to make purchasing decisions based on their own judgment and circumstance.

Per-faculty self-reported textbook costs varied but largely remained far below all projected costs for AMP. (Course material affordability has improved recently: the growing success of the Zero Textbook Cost course indicator and the proliferation of Open Educational Resources have eased the burden of textbook costs for thousands of students.) Note that numbers for smaller faculties may not be reliable due to the sample size, though they were generally well represented in the data.



We cannot know that the average textbook cost of students who would have participated is identical to the average for all students, but we also cannot assume a reliable correlation between actual costs and the choice to opt out. The simplest ways to compensate for this uncertainty about cost and individual choice are to increase their estimated non-AMP textbook costs by 20% and use a broad set of potential opt-out rates.

## Estimating Opt-Out Rate

Opt-out rates for this program are challenging to project, for many reasons:

- In theory, the proportion of students who would have spent less on textbooks than the projected rate of the AMP fee (~76% for a \$260/semester AMP low case, ~84% for a \$325/semester medium case, and ~89% for a \$400/semester high case) would have opted out, all else being equal. That is, even if AMP had turned out to cost the minimum suggested value,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of students would still have been paying more for AMP than what they would otherwise spend on textbooks.
- 47% of respondents in the 2023 Annual Survey paid \$0 for textbooks due to some combination of choice, necessity, alternative resources, and ZTC classes.
- AMP would have had positive features (e.g. first-day access, convenience compared to textbook shopping, benefits for the portion of students who face extreme textbook costs). Individual students may have weighed these factors differently against financial costs when deciding whether to opt out. However, for many students, these factors could only have gone so far if the core prospect of affordability did not make financial sense for them.
- Other factors would have also led toward a lower opt-out rate (e.g. degree of awareness of the opt-out option, degree of access to functional opt-out mechanisms, promotion of the value of AMP, the pressures of reduced textbook access and options for students who would have opted out). In consultations, one major point of discussion was around the accessibility of opt-outs: the problems surrounding automatic billing for students who do not know about opting out, are not able to, or do not remember to do so.
- University presentations and Q&A sessions were clear that the project required working toward a negligible opt-out rate, and that the primary recourse of students who would experience negative impacts by opting out (e.g. the risk of reduced textbook availability compared to pre-AMP) would be to choose not to opt out next time. Low uptake would make the program financially unsustainable, as it would not be appealing to textbook manufacturers.<sup>1</sup>
- AMP was inspired by the controversial 'Equitable Access' program at UC Davis, which launched with a [47%](#) opt-out rate in 2020/21. (Although the opt-out rates later fell into the 20-30% range, this appears to have gone hand in hand with a massive investment in targeted grant funding, which has compensated for some of the program's challenges.) The opt-out rates were [driven](#) primarily by the program costing significantly more than buying or renting textbooks as normal, with strong sidelines in 'I was able to find free PDFs online' and 'My professor(s) said I did not need textbook(s) for my classes.' These factors are especially relevant at UAlberta due to the success of ZTC.

We opted to model three plausible cases: 45%, 30%, and 15% opt-out rates.

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<sup>1</sup> An AMP briefing note obtained through a FOIP request highlighted the value for textbook manufacturers in contrast to students' normal purchasing behavior: "Where currently there might only be 25% uptake on a specific product, the inclusion of specific products in an Equitable Access program would mean 50 - 60% uptake."

## Estimating Total Costs for Participating Students

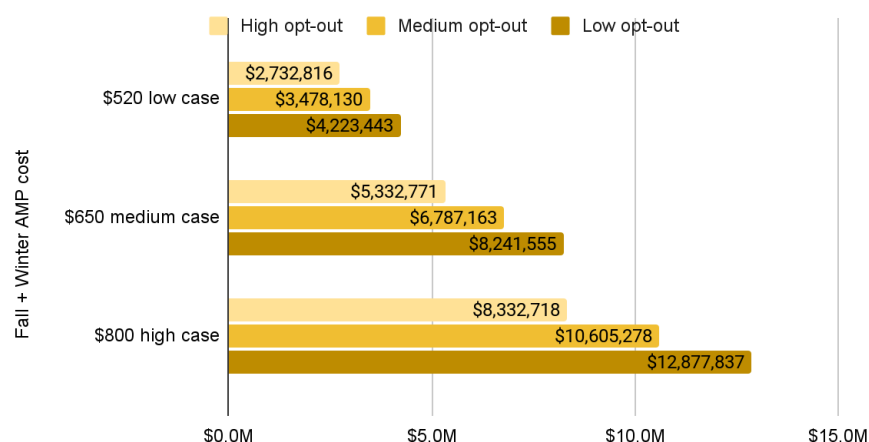
Our formula for estimating how much more AMP would have cost students compared to their normal textbook purchasing is the number of participating students (for any given participation rate) times the difference between what AMP would have cost and what the average student actually spends (+20%), based on inflation-adjusted cost and 2023/24 enrolment data:

$$(Undergraduate\ enrolment \times (1 - opt-out\ rate)) \times (AMP\ cost - (average\ actual\ cost * 1.2))$$

| Fall + Winter AMP cost | 55% participation | 70% participation | 85% participation |
|------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| \$520 low case         | \$2.7M            | \$3.5M            | \$4.2M            |
| \$650 medium case      | \$5.3M            | \$6.8M            | \$8.2M            |
| \$800 high case        | \$8.3M            | \$10.6M           | \$12.9M           |

As discussed above, many variables and incentives impact the likelihood of these cases. Student leaders emerged from consultations believing that the medium cost case was most likely, and that the University would push strongly for high participation. Our best estimate is that implementing AMP in 2024/25 would have cost participating students at least \$6.8 million more, corresponding to around \$267 per student who would have participated.

Estimated extra cost of AMP for students who would have participated, compared to their projected actual textbook costs



## Conclusion

These excess cost estimates support the idea that automatic textbook billing models (often branded as ['equitable access'](#) or ['inclusive access'](#)) have questionable value to students. Any proposal for such a model needs to be evaluated carefully, on its merits, in terms of the net level of value it provides for students with a range of needs. The Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) has recently [recommended against](#) institutional adoption on grounds that provide a partial set of benchmarks.

While financial costs are only one aspect of how students weigh automatic textbook billing proposals, extra costs of hundreds of dollars per year have often proved more intuitively meaningful to most students than to University decision-makers. As a means of evaluating automatic textbook billing models' practicality and value, excessive cost matters.

This is especially true as other key arguments for AMP, like equity benefits, have not tended to be convincing in consultations. As one senior administrator noted in an email, "I think that ongoing use of 'equitable access' [as a name or descriptor for AMP] may actually have the impact of setting back the hard work we all are doing in...equity, diversity and inclusion. We need to make changes in textbooks/course materials because of where publishers are going and the business realities of bookstores. That's the key driver here, not EDI."

Excessive cost becomes even more salient as another key argument (the academic impact of first-day textbook access) faces similar obstacles. For example, [a recent study](#) of automatic textbook billing programs across 13 colleges found:

*...no significant differences in either overall or population-specific academic outcomes between the Inclusive Access pilot semester and the two prior falls in which the courses were taught. The findings demonstrate that benefits accrued from relative cost-savings and/or Day One Access were insufficient to produce significant improvements in academic outcomes, with no significant differences in outcomes evidenced for nonwhite, federal Pell grant award recipients [i.e. needs-based grant recipients], and/or non-traditional students over the age of 25. These results suggest that measures beyond cost-savings and Day One access, such as hidden costs, the need for perpetual access, and the repercussions to student debt from deferring college expenses, should also be considered when evaluating ways to provide students with affordable course materials that enable high-quality, equitable learning experiences.*

Alternatives must be explored: it is far from clear that automatic textbook billing models (even with a reasonable opt-out mechanism) are the best or only solution, even for the students who face extreme textbook costs.

As one example, Open Educational Resources and similar low- or zero-cost course materials have [proliferated](#) widely at the University of Alberta, and still have powerful potential to address these inequities without creating others in the process. These approaches also have the benefit of being listed in the Student Experience Action Plan, the Teaching, Learning and Evaluation Policy Suite, and the Alberta 2030 strategy. As the CARL statement points out, automatic textbook billing models "can prevent instructors from offering free or more affordable course resources, such as Open Educational Resources (OERs)," which could jeopardize years of strategic improvements to affordability and the student experience.