

Textbook Costs Survey

September 26, 2023

Prepared for UASU Executive Committee by
Department of Research and Advocacy



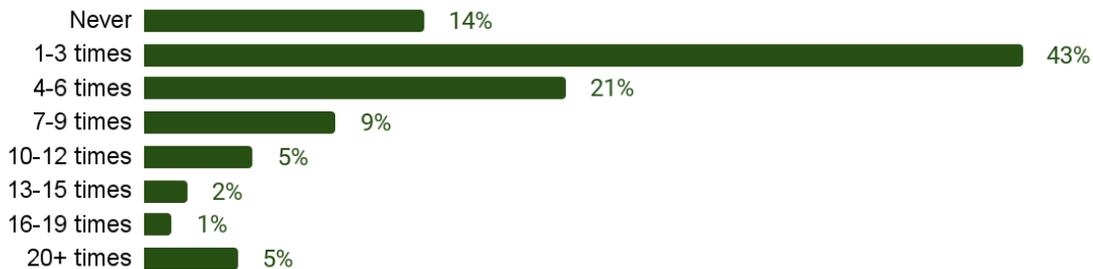
Overview and Key Findings

This survey ran on the UASU Perks platform, September 15-25, 2023. It reached 1,088 unique respondents. Elements of this survey were repeated from the [January 2018](#) and [October 2020](#) Be Book Smart surveys.

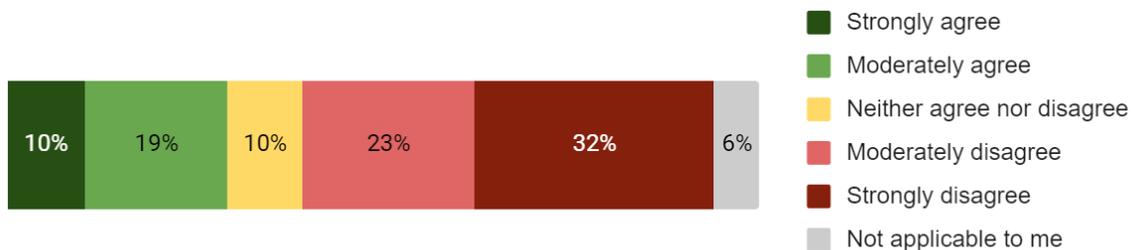
- 86% of respondents had taken a class with a required textbook that was not actually required. 13% had experienced this at least ten times, rising to 19% for third-year students or higher.
- On a five-point scale, 55% of respondents moderately or strongly disagree that they purchase all their required textbooks each year.
- On a five-point scale, 55% of respondents moderately or strongly agree that, in their first year, they bought more textbooks than were necessary.
- On average, this semester respondents paid around \$106 for textbooks, which is extremely low.
 - Around 40% paid \$0, likely because of rising Open Educational Resource (OER) usage, other strategies for adaptation, and/or inability to afford textbooks.
- On average, respondents would have paid \$324 for all required textbooks.
 - For roughly 18%, required costs were \$0, likely because of rising OER usage and other ZTC practices, with some practicum students included.
- On average, this semester respondents paid around \$216 less than the cost of required textbooks (as calculated from the students who answered both questions).
 - Only 13% paid as much as the cost of required textbooks; 69% paid less.
- Compared to 2018, in the context of actions taken instead of buying textbooks, respondents were much less likely (31% down from 48%) to have borrowed a friend's copy (an option that is less available as the textbook industry shifts digital) and much more likely (49% up from 37%) to have found alternative resources online instead of using a textbook.
- 11% of respondents had picked a course because it was listed as Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC). Text responses often praised instructors for selecting zero-cost course materials.
- Text responses highlighted student strategies that would become far less feasible under the proposed Academic Materials Program, including retaining hard-copy books over multiple years, sharing with roommates, using alternative online materials, using students' own best judgment when deciding what books to consider mandatory, and waiting until later classes to decide. Responses also highlighted instructors' efforts to provide alternative resources rather than piping students toward mandatory textbooks.

"How often (if at all) have you had a class that had a textbook listed as required, but the textbook was not actually required?"

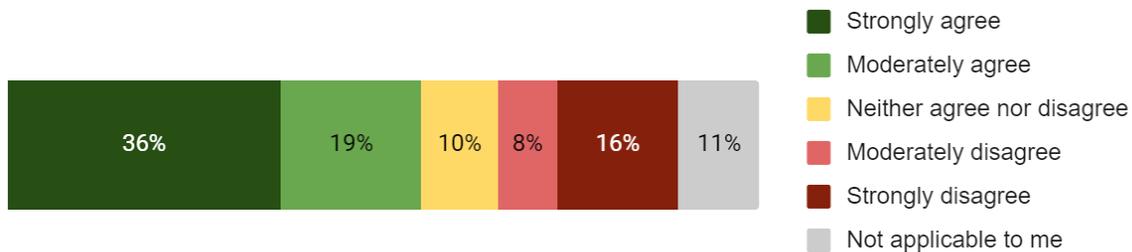
- This had happened at least once to 86% of respondents, at least ten times to 13% of respondents (rising to 19% for third-year students or higher), and at least 20 times to 5% of respondents (self-reported).



"Agree or disagree? I purchase all of the textbooks required for my courses each year."



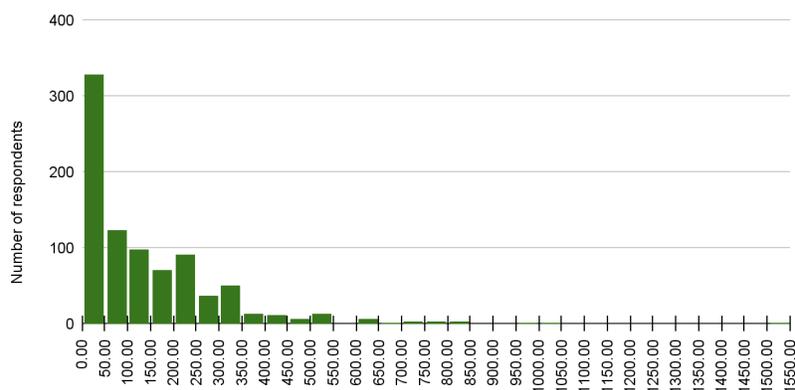
"Agree or disagree? In my first year, I bought more textbooks than were necessary."



"This semester (Fall 2023), how much did you actually pay for textbooks? (Please estimate a dollar value. Closest \$50 is fine.)"

This question was formatted as a text field. While it did lead to some loss in quantitative data (i.e. a scattering of 'TOO MUCH' responses) and require significant data cleaning effort, the text format captured useful comments and context, and allowed students to opt out with context (e.g. students in practicum semesters without textbooks). Ranges were translated into midpoints (e.g. \$250-350 became \$300). 1,046 respondents provided quantifiable responses to this question.

Histogram of student-estimated actual textbook expenses, Fall 2023



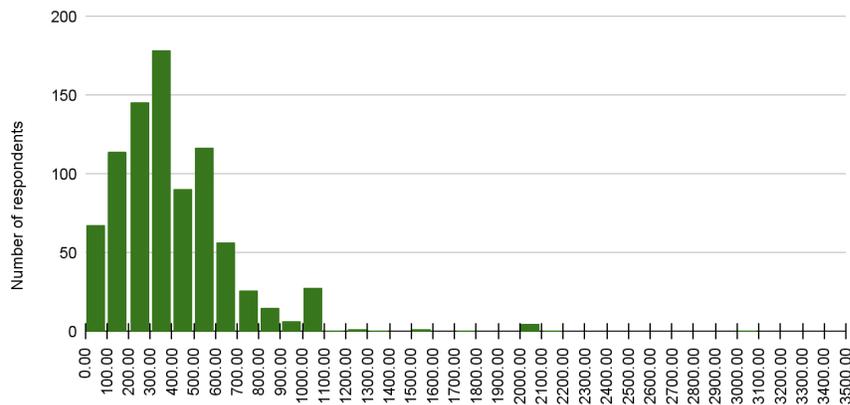
Notable responses:

- "So far nothing. I usually wait til the last moment to buy a book."
- "\$120 for online texts for Math and Stat. My other courses (ENGL and EDU) were extremely nice and had no required textbook purchases."
- "\$0, but I'm using a \$100-200 textbook from a previous class for a current one."
- "All together about \$75, because I borrowed textbooks but bought my own novel books I needed."
- "I haven't bought any of my "required" textbooks yet, I have found free online versions or am just not going to use any."
- "Luckily I didn't need to buy textbooks since I can share with my roommate."
- "\$150 but if I would have gotten them from the bookstore it would have been \$380."
- "My profs did put free eBooks for some of these however due to my neurodivergence, eBooks do not work for me."
- "All of my textbooks were thankfully online and provided by profs this year."
- "\$0. This year I found a friend who literally gave me the one textbook that I can't get realistically through the library."
- "\$700. It was very expensive since there were no second hand options."
- "\$0, not about to spend money on things like this, when half the time even tho it's required profs don't even use them... I'd rather try and find them online instead, and not worry about spending money."

"This semester (Fall 2023), if you had purchased all required textbooks, how much do you think you would have paid? (Please estimate a dollar value. Closest \$50 is fine.)"

This question was handled like the previous one, noting also that 'N/A' responses were coded as zero. 1,052 respondents provided quantifiable responses. It should be noted that this is an attempt to reverse-engineer these costs; better estimates could be extrapolated from UAlberta Bookstore data, which has not been forthcoming.

Histogram of student-estimated costs of required textbooks, Fall 2023



Notable responses:

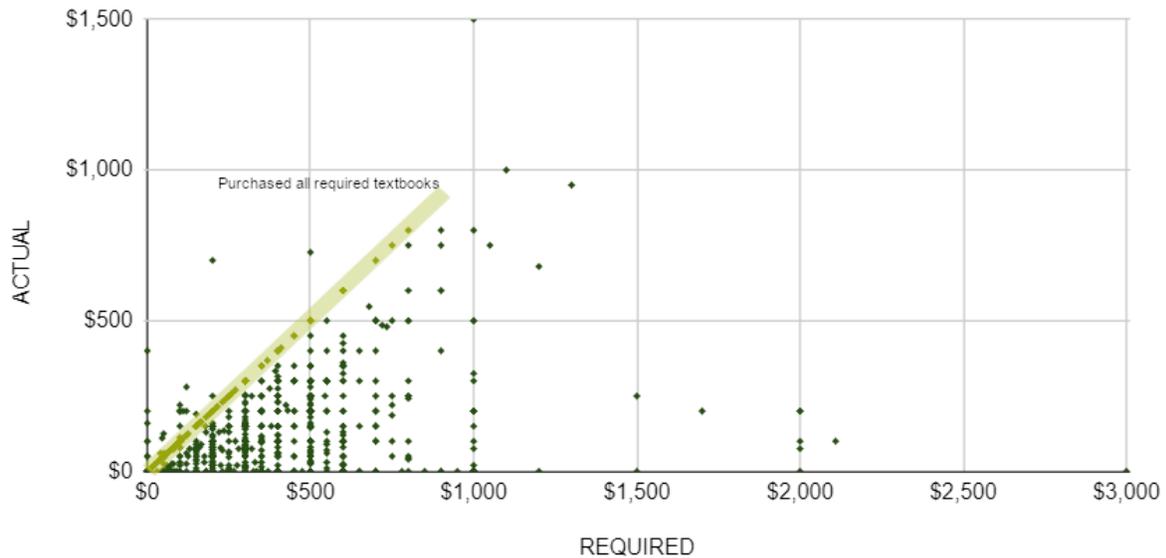
- "\$500 - that is the cost for the main environmental engineering book. I bought it in second year and have used it in many classes since."
- "Most of my courses don't have required texts anymore...(400-level engineering)."
- "I did buy all of them, including an extra one for \$60 because the bookstore's online course book list was wrong 🤦"
- "There were 2 books I already owned, 1 I found on [Edmonton Public Library], so probably around \$200."
- "Most classes had links on syllabus, eclass or books on hold in library."
- "None (all my profs are providing free pdfs)."

Comparing actual and required purchases

1,029 respondents provided quantifiable responses to both of the previous two questions:

- 69% paid less for textbooks than the required amount.
- 13% paid the same amount as required.
- 16% paid zero *and* had a required amount of zero (often with a grateful note about instructors using free course materials).
- 3% paid more for textbooks than the required amount.

Overwhelmingly, students do not purchase all required textbooks. The average difference between required and actual amounts was \$216, with a maximum of \$3,000.



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

