FIXING THE BROKEN TEXTBOOK MARKET

THIRD EDITION

U.S. PIRG | Education Fund

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Third Edition

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FIXING THE BROKEN TEXTBOOK MARKET: THIRD EDITION

U.S. PIRG EDUCATION FUND

TEXTBOOKS ARE TOO EXPENSIVE, and have been for a very long time. Little competition in the college publishing industry- and therefore little consumer choice - has contributed to the cost of course materials increasing at three times the rate of inflation since the 1970s.[1] While the curve has plateaued the past couple of years, there has been little change in student experience. Students have continued to skip buying assigned course materials due to cost at similar rates.[2]

Then COVID-19 happened. To protect public health, educators adjusted their courses for emergency remote instruction at breakneck speed. In the spring, some publishers and education technology companies offered temporary free access to online books and homework platforms for the final few months of the spring term,[3] but the return of full-price materials in the summer coincided with the second wave of COVID-19.

An economic crisis has dovetailed the public health crisis, where youth unemployment in the summer of 2020 was double that of summer 2019[4] and over 8 percent higher than the general population.[5] Any member of the campus community can tell you that the pandemic has exacerbated existing weaknesses within higher education - but how does textbook affordability factor into this difficult landscape for teaching and learning?

This national survey of more than 5,000 college students was taken in September 2020, and builds on similar surveys from 2013 and 2019. It offers a snapshot in time of student experiences, particularly those at four-year institutions, in the first full semester of the pandemic and points out more long-term problems that institutions and national leaders must work to solve.

Key finding 1: Students continue to skip buying assigned textbooks despite concerns it will impact their grade

In 2020, 65 percent of students surveyed reported skipping buying a textbook because of cost; 63 percent skipped purchasing one during the same period the previous year. Students are still very concerned that not purchasing materials will negatively impact their grade, with 90 percent reporting being significantly or somewhat concerned in both years.

Key finding 2: More students are skipping access codes during the pandemic

The number of students who report not buying an access code increased from 17 percent in 2019 to 21 percent in 2020. This might be driven by financial strain, or possibly an increased reliance on access codes as part of remote learning. Forgoing an access code means students miss out on homework, quizzes, and other important parts of their grade in a class.

Key finding 3: COVID-19 is hitting students hard and impacts course material affordability

Students were broadly impacted by the pandemic, with 79 percent of students reporting being impacted in some way (beyond, of course, largely staying at home). Those side effects of the pandemic were correlated with greater struggles to access course materials. These numbers have almost certainly risen

since this survey was taken in September. For example, 11 percent of students reported being quarantined with either a confirmed or suspected case of COVID-19 - and this was measured before the spike in cases that took over the country ahead of the holiday season.

Furthermore, our survey is a snapshot in time for students, largely at four-year institutions, who were currently enrolled for the fall semester. Our survey likely missed out on the students who may have dropped out or transferred institutions beyond the reach of our volunteers.

Key Finding 4: Lack of reliable internet correlates with significant issues for course material access and student success

10 percent of students reported not having reliable enough internet access to participate in remote classes. That lack of reliable internet correlated with two other important metrics. 30 percent of students without reliable internet access reported not buying an access code, compared to 21 percent for the larger sample. Furthermore, 8 percent of students without reliable internet access reported failing a class due to not being able to afford their course materials, compared to the national average of 2 percent.

Key finding 5: Food insecure students skip buying course materials at significantly higher rates

Students who faced food insecurity were more heavily impacted by unaffordable course materials. 82 percent of students who reported missing a meal due to the pandemic also reported skipping buying textbooks due to cost; furthermore, 38 percent reported they skipped buying an access code. The percentage of food insecure students who skipped access codes is nearly twice the national average, and an unacceptable barrier for students who already face huge challenges to completing their degree.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has raised the barriers students face both financially and technologically to access course materials, even if it has not necessarily made course materials more expensive. Students who lost jobs due to the pandemic or who lacked reliable internet access were hardest hit by course materials costs. These problems will persist past the public health crisis without increased funding and implementing long term policies that prioritize access and affordability.

Recommendations

Legislatures and education agencies should provide funding for free and open textbook programs, address the lack of universal access to the internet and suitable technology, and put safeguards in place regarding the use of commercial materials that pose threats to student affordability, equity, and access.

Institutions of higher education and systems should continue to build infrastructure - grants, professional development and recognition, dedicated open education librarians - to make it easier for professors to adopt open textbooks and to release their work under an open license. Furthermore, institutions mark the cost of course materials during class registration, and should think twice before locking themselves into "inclusive access" contracts that entrench access codes.[6]

Faculty should consider adopting an open textbook, and think twice before assigning an access code. Educators should also take uneven internet access into consideration when designing their course, by making materials available to download and creating assignments that do not require consistent internet to submit.

Student governments and organizations should advocate at the local level for policies that support open textbook adoptions, reduce the use of access codes, and fill basic student needs. Student governments can also establish hot-spot libraries.

The broken textbook market in the pandemic

THE TEXTBOOK MARKET IS BROKEN.

Little competition in the college publishing industry- and therefore little consumer choice - has driven textbook prices sky high. Textbook prices skyrocketed for decades starting in the 1970s; that upward trend has only slowed in the past few years.[7] Struggling to cover out of pocket costs, especially course material is one of the canaries in the higher education coal mine, alongside other indicators like FAFSA completion and first year enrollment. Many of the birds are not sounding good.

With a plateauing of textbook prices, one would expect to see more students buying textbooks and fewer impacts on students' ability to succeed in class. This has not happened. From our 2014 survey to our 2019 student survey, there was no significant change in the numbers of students skipping textbook purchases, skipping meals to afford textbooks, or indicating concerns about impacts on their grades.[8] Why is that? The nature of course materials has dramatically changed - and not in students' favor. Access codes have diminished the ways students have traditionally cut costs- buying used, utilizing library copies, and sharing physical books with classmates.[9]

In order to maintain relevance and profitability, college textbook publishers have rebranded from book printers to education technology companies.[10] Access codes place readings, assignments, and sometimes attendance behind a paid password protected paywall, and have become ubiquitous in introductory level courses. Access codes provide temporary access to materials, with login access typically expiring at the end of a school term. Students who skip buying an access code do not have access to homework, quizzes, readings, and supplementary materials- meaning that choice results in an automatic 10 to 20 percent cut to a grade. Yet, pre-pandemic, nearly 1 in 5 students report skipping buying an access code due to cost. Given the $1.7 trillion dollars in student loan debt that Americans have taken out to go to college,[11] it is simply unacceptable that a student should risk failing a course for lack of a hundred dollars to pay for their homework.

Move to remote learning

There has not been a more drastic change in the higher education landscape than the upheaval of March 2020. Classrooms from pre-kindergarten to universities closed their doors to save lives and slow the spread of COVID-19. Classes with detailed lesson plans and syllabi had to retool their plans while new restrictions were being rolled out daily. University systems, libraries, commercial businesses, and nonprofits launched webinars to help educators better understand how to use the new platforms, pedagogy for remote classes, and tips on understanding fair use.

For the first few weeks of the crisis, publishers provided educators with free, temporary access to previously expensive resources.[12] Faculty expressed feelings of being overwhelmed by these offers from publishers, whose local sales representatives emailed multiple times per week with pitches and virtual office hours to help set up class websites.[13] While these mea-

sures were sometimes seen as helpful, faculty understood them to be stop-gap measures for a temporary situation; the timely, smart marketing seemed to have the unspoken goal of seeking long term business opportunities.

Access codes and failures in access

Remote learning, while necessary to protect public health, by definition needs reliable access to high speed internet to stream lectures via Zoom, access email and other essential university-issued communication tools, and use learning management systems and access codes to submit assignments. Yet, 42 million Americans do not have access to high speed internet.[14]

This dynamic existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic, but was less visible and urgent to fix. As access codes became more common, students became tethered to routers for activities as simple as reading their textbooks. Before the pandemic, students who did not have access to high speed internet at home could go to the campus library, a local coffee shop, or the student center to complete their work. These avenues closed one after the other just as access to the internet became critically needed not just to turn in homework, but to attend class at all.

Students with spotty home internet access, or who had to compete with siblings and parents for limited broadband, have struggled to stay online during classes but also during exams. With a gap in services, some students have resorted to sitting in parking lots at their college or local businesses to access classes and coursework.[15]

Some campus and community libraries have responded to increased student need with hotspot libraries, where mobile routers can be checked out for a set period of time in a similar fashion to how a student might borrow a library book.[16] Some faculty have moved from using materials only accessible while online to downloadable texts, like open textbooks, to provide students with more flexibility and lighten the need for internet access. These are stop gap measures to unequal access to the internet. At its core, this is a national infrastructure failing that will need state and federal policy solutions to fully solve.

Economic uncertainty makes a bad situation worse

COVID-19 impacted just about every part of life around the world. Layoffs quickly followed the closure of many businesses in the service and retail industry in March and beyond,[17] which employ disproportionately high numbers of stereotypically college age students.[18] Youth unemployment soared in the summer of 2020 to over 18 percent, double that of the previous three summers.[19]

During the Great Recession, institutions of higher education, in particular community colleges, had an uptick in enrollment as un- or under-employed Americans sought additional certifications or a different career path to build up their resumes.[20] In the past, upticks in the national unemployment rate have corresponded with increased rates of enrollment in higher education.[21] However, in a year where little had gone as planned, it's not surprising that trend doesn't seem to be holding. Both two- and four-year institutions are experiencing drop offs in enrollment, with community colleges and first time enrollment seeing the biggest declines. The only exception to this is the for-profit college industry, which has seen a modest increase in enrollment.[22]

The bottom line is people are making less money during the pandemic, and students are making even less than the general population. Textbooks, access codes, and other course materials are one of the largest out of

pocket expenses for higher education, and students spend over $3 billion in financial aid spent on textbooks a year.[23] Students have always made hard choices, from "can I afford this textbook" to "can I afford to attend college at all?" The pandemic is forcing more of them to face these tough questions, and unfortunately more students are saying "I can't."

Digging holes in sand: how support systems are fairing

Issues around access to course materials, food, housing, and other basic needs have plagued students at colleges and universities for a long time. In a survey released from the Hope Center, nearly half of college students reported food insecurity during the pandemic.[24] Nearly half of students at four year colleges experienced housing insecurity, but that number shoots to nearly two thirds when looking at students attending two year colleges.[25]

Students have led the charge in solving the lack of access to basic needs with institutions playing an important partner role. From starting the National Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness in the 1980s to Swipe Out Hunger in the 2010s, student-led organizations have become key players in the fight to end student hunger and meet their basic needs. Student governments across the country have founded campus food pantries. Some campus entities like Trojan Shelter and Bruin Shelter are registered student organizations that provide housing and services to Los Angeles area college students.[26]

Unfortunately, COVID-19 has made providing direct services more difficult, if not impossible. While Bruin Shelter, for example, is able to continue providing some services, they indefinitely delayed the opening of their shelter during the Fall 2020.[27] Campus food pantries have had to adjust their operations, roll back their services, and in some cases, close.[28] This comes as students are facing high levels of need, in the 2020 Hope Center RealCollege survey, 25 percent of community college students and 22 percent of students attending four year institutions went hungry because they did not have enough money to buy food.[29]

Libraries have played a critical role in making course materials accessible on multiple fronts, from helping find free resources for classes (which could be free, public domain, or simply commercial materials that are already library-owned) to initiating and administering open textbook policies. Many students access their textbooks directly through course reserves, where the library provides textbooks for short term lending. For a few hours at a time, students can check out one of the limited copies of a textbook to study.

At the start of COVID-19, libraries began offering webinars and events to help faculty move their classes to emergency remote instruction, often with a focus on equity and ease of access. They also worked hard to maintain services, but maintaining a textbook course reserve with strict public safety regulations is challenging. When any physical book is returned to the library it undergoes a mandatory quarantine, usually for 72 hours or longer. Recently, that quarantine has been extended in some places to seven days.[30] In places still offering physical course reserves, a single student may only be able to access that shared textbook once or twice a week, effectively cutting out one of the long-standing ways that students have kept their course materials costs low. Some libraries have been able to transition to digital lending models using controlled digital lending, where they use scanned copies of books to maintain a one copy one lender ratio just as they would with print copies.[31] Many textbook publishers do not

sell digital copies of textbooks to libraries,[32] meaning that some institutions have been unable to offer course reserves at all, to the detriment of students who have relied on them for decades to cut costs.

Members of the campus communities are rallying to support each other, but needs are high and resources are in short supply, especially given the inadequate funding from the federal level to maintain campus operations in the pandemic. While attempts to fulfill students' basic needs are essential in the short term, they only scratch the surface of the underlying problems that have been laid bare by the pandemic, and will continue to plague students without further action to reduce out of pocket costs and meet students basic needs.

Key Findings

FOR THE THIRD TIME, the Student PIRGs have run a nationwide survey to understand the college textbook buying experience. In the first edition of *Fixing the Broken Textbook Market*, which surveyed students in 2013, we found that 65 percent of students had skipped buying a book because of cost; in the second edition, we found that number largely unchanged despite publishers' claims that digital products had met students' call for relief, and that 17 percent of students had skipped buying an access code.[33] While the focus of the second edition of *Fixing the Broken Textbook Market* was on the changes in the textbook market over time, this year's survey goal was more narrow. By comparing the Fall 2019 survey results with the Fall 2020 survey results we can better understand the impact of COVID-19 on students and textbook affordability.

With over 82 participating institutions and more than 5,000 responses from across the country, this is our largest textbook affordability survey to date. The majority of the institutions were four year institutions, with a mix of both public and private institutions. Early in the pandemic, the Student PIRGs shifted our entire organizing network of thousands of staff and student leaders to remote activities, to protect the health of our campus communities. Internships, meetings, and public events moved to an online format, creating both challenges and opportunities for activists. The entire survey was conducted digitally using multiple forms of outreach. For a more detailed description of survey collection practices, basic demographics of respondents, and a listing of the top 20 participating campuses, see the methodology section.

Key Finding 1: Students continue to skip buying assigned textbooks despite worrying it will impact their grade

In spite of large changes and turmoil in the higher education space nationally, when looking at the big picture the changes between Fall 2019 and 2020 are less drastic than one would expect but still concerning. In Fall 2020, 65 percent of students surveyed reported skipping buying a textbook, while 63 percent skipped purchasing one during the same period the previous year. The increase was smaller than expected, given the changes we anticipated due to the pandemic. In part, we think that may be attributed to the fact that we have historically slightly oversampled first year students in our surveys, and this year they formed a smaller segment of our respondents. Upperclassmen are more likely to know the myriad cheaper ways to access their materials, compared to their newer classmates. Students are still very concerned that not purchasing materials will negatively impact their grade, with 90 percent reporting being significantly or somewhat concerned in both years.

65%

of students reported that they skipped buying or renting a textbook.

Key Finding 2: More students are skipping access codes during the pandemic

In Fall 2020, 21 percent of students reported

skipping purchasing access codes, a four percent increase from the previous year. Access codes put a paywall between students and their homework, quizzes, readings, and sometimes even attendance. Any student who skips purchasing access codes is forgoing full participation in the class, a choice that holds more dire consequences than skipping a physical textbook. One in five students across the US started their term with a lower ceiling on their possible grade in a course than their peers for want of a hundred dollars to purchase access to their homework.

21%
of students reported that they skipped buying an access code.

It is possible that more faculty are assigning access codes due to remote learning and therefore more opportunities for students to not buy them, something that students have told us anecdotally but was not capturable in our survey. Another possibility is that money is simply tighter and students are having to make these hard decisions more frequently, despite the additional support of living at home when before they were more independent at a residential campus.

Key Finding 3: COVID-19 is hitting students hard and impacts course material affordability

COVID-19 turned higher education and most institutions upside down. Students were broadly impacted by the pandemic, with 79 percent of students reporting being impacted in some way (beyond, of course, largely staying at home). That percentage, as well as the statistics for each subsequent question about student basic needs in the pandemic, has almost certainly risen since this survey was taken in September 2020. For example, 11 percent of students reported having been quarantined with either a confirmed or suspected case of COVID-19. That number is higher than the national data at the COVID Tracking Project, which indicates that 7.7% of Americans have been diagnosed with COVID-19.[34] That generally tracks with studies showing that college campuses likely fueled COVID-19 outbreaks in their wider communities this fall,[35] and could signal the start in the spike of cases that was seen in November.

Furthermore, our survey is a snapshot in time for students, largely at four-year institutions, who were currently enrolled for the fall semester. Given the financial struggles that many Americans faced with the pandemic, our survey likely missed out on the student who had struggled the most, to the point that they dropped out of college or transferred institutions beyond the reach of our volunteers.

79%
of students reported being impacted in some way by the pandemic, such as losing their job, getting COVID-19, or transferring schools.

Not only was students' personal financial well-being impacted with job losses, but with many students living at home, job insecurity in their household had ripple effects on students' ability to meet their basic needs. Our survey indicates that 20 percent of students lost their jobs, and that 16 percent were furloughed or had hours cut.

Many students rely on summer work or full time jobs to pay for course materials, among other out of pocket expenses students face that are not traditionally factored into the price tag of a degree.[36] It is impossible (and has been for a long time) to cover the cost of tuition and fees on today's minimum wage. According to the Urban Institute, a student working part time during the academic year and close to full time during the summer at minimum wage would only be able to cover 57 percent of the average tuition and fees at a four-year institution.[37] Despite these challenges, many students still rely on that money to pay for part of course materials and other incidentals. This summer, that option was removed for many students - and their ability to pay for materials suffered. For students who lost their job due to the pandemic, 74 percent report skipping buying a textbook because of their high cost, and 27 percent skipped buying an access code. That compared to 68 percent and 21 percent for the full survey sample, respectively.

Key Finding 4: Lack of reliable internet correlates with significant issues for course material access and student success

To understand how lack of access to high speed internet impacted how students interact with their course materials, we took a deeper look at the 10 percent of students who reported not having sufficient internet access. Unsurprisingly, when students do not have reliable access to the technology needed to participate in class, it impacts their choices and behavior when it comes to purchasing course materials. 30 percent of students who did not have reliable internet access reported that they also skipped buying an access code, which is 9 percentage points higher than the general population.

Given that this survey was collected online, we may have missed connecting with the most impacted students, and the gap in homework access that we have identified is even worse than our data can show. In California alone, the Education Trust estimates that well over 100,000 low-income students lack reliable internet access.[38] Beyond that limitation, it is also likely that if a student cannot afford high speed internet access, they also lack the money to buy $100 access codes.

30%

of students who lacked reliable internet access reported skipping buying an access code - compared to 21% of their peers nationally.

This gap has very real consequences for students. While overall, 2 percent of surveyed students reported failing a class because they could not afford materials, 8 percent of those without internet access reported failing classes due to the prohibitively high cost of materials.

Key Finding 5: Food insecure students skip buying course materials at significantly higher rates

10 percent of students reported missing meals due to COVID-19. Of those, 82 percent also reported not buying a textbook, which is higher than the national sample of 65 percent. Even more troubling, 38 percent reported not buying an access code compared to 21 percent nationally.

Students who experienced hunger in the pandemic skipped buying access codes nearly twice the rate as their peers. This set of students cannot choose to prioritize either health or academic success; they have been priced out of both. This is especially alarming because our survey has a very

conservative estimate of how many college students are food insecure.[39] Low-income and first generation college students face many more barriers than their more well-off peers in pursuit of an education; failing classes for want of course materials, on top of all the other ways that these students are vulnerable to getting off track for graduation, is unacceptable. Considering the scale of the student debt crisis and the long-term upward trend in tuition costs, this situation is more than a shame - it's an urgent problem for institutions of higher education to solve if they want to improve student success and ensure they can graduate on time with a degree.

86%
of students who experienced food insecurity during the pandemic reported skipping a textbook.

Conclusion

HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC IMPACTED COURSE MATERIALS AFFORDABILITY?

COVID-19 has underscored existing fault lines of inequity across the country, especially in higher education. The systems of support to meet students' basic needs that have existed in higher education for decades were already falling short of demand.

With the additional pressures of this unprecedented time, students who were already in danger of falling behind pre-pandemic faced new challenges. Students with reduced income cannot buy materials. Students without high speed internet cannot use solely online products or engage with remote courses. In short, low-income students may struggle to participate in classes that set up smaller financial hurdles after that tuition bill is paid.

The underlying problems that created many of the issues of access will remain after the pandemic, unless institutional and national leaders act to break down these long-simmering tensions that keep students from fully participating in class - and hold them back in their pursuit of a degree.

Two underlying barriers that will not fade away on their own are the increased use of access codes and unreliable home internet. If higher education continues to rely on charging students for temporary online access to required coursework, while our country cannot deliver reliable and affordable high-speed internet to students, these twin problems will result in low-income students being left in the dust.

Recommendations

Legislatures and education agencies should provide funding and infrastructure support for free open textbooks and open educational resources. Open textbooks, which are written under an open copyright license and are free for students to use, eliminate the cost barrier for students and give them permanent access to their materials.[40] Students can also download open textbooks, so they can access them both online and offline, lessening the need for constant access to high speed internet.

States across the country have created diverse structures for programs that support open textbook adoption and creation. These range from the California Community Colleges' Zero-Textbook-Cost degree program, where students are able to graduate with an associate's degree without textbook costs, to the Massachusetts Department of Education's workshop and development programs that incentivize intra-college collaborations to create materials for introductory level classes, to the hundreds of institutional programs run at a campus-by-campus level, states have broad options to make it easier for faculty to switch to free open options.

Since the Great Recession, state financial contributions to higher education have shrunk in all but a handful of states;[41] COVID-19 will surely exacerbate these long-term trends. This lack of funding has left students footing a higher percentage of the costs that institutions must regrettably pass along to them. If states are serious about making sure students can afford postsecondary education and the materials that go along with it, states must pick up more of the tab. To that end, Congress should look to create strong federal-state partnerships that incentivize states to increase their education appropriations.

In addition to supporting open textbooks and higher education, state and federal leaders must address the uneven access to high speed internet and suitable computers. The internet is now essential infrastructure for employment, business, education, and many aspects of life yet is often regarded as a luxury. The pandemic has proved to us, without any doubt, that reliable internet service is as essential as electricity, water, and heat. We need serious investments from elected officials and state agencies to close internet service gaps, not just in rural areas but for all.

Higher education institutions and systems should continue to build infrastructure - grants, tech support, professional development and recognition, course release - to make it easier for professors to adopt open textbooks and to release their work under an open license. Focusing support on high enrollment general education classes amplifies the impact of these measures. Hiring additional scholarly communications or open educational resource librarians can provide critical support for faculty wishing to make the switch. Other ways to directly support faculty include allowing for course release to adjust syllabus and materials and recognizing contributions to the open sphere during the tenure and promotion process. This should all be part of the institution's strategic plans to improve student success, and be supported as much as possible by state system-wide initiatives to share best practices. Systems that have created strong programs encouraging open

textbooks have seen exciting returns on investment and increases in student success rates and completion. These programs are most valuable as part of a long term strategic plan rather than one-off or emergency measures.

To support students making challenging financial decisions, institutions can add price transparency for course materials into the course catalogue during the course registration process. Some institutions do this by including the full cost of materials in the course information, by adding a low cost designation for courses under a set price threshold, or by building better price-comparison software into the campus bookstore site and linking it to the course registration page.

While open textbooks help alleviate some of the barriers created by the shift to access codes, students still need access to the internet both on and off campus. Some campuses have created hot-spot libraries and laptop rental programs. These programs have created lifelines for students without high speed internet or device access at home. While these programs are urgently needed during the current crisis, they will continue to be necessary until universal internet access is achieved.

Universities should also be weary of programs that further entrench the need for constant and inflexible internet access, such as automatic textbook billing and other initiatives that increase access code use.[42]

Much like gaps in internet access, student basic needs insecurity will not disappear when the pandemic goes away. Institutions can establish support networks for student basic needs with a goal of eventually eliminating these shortfalls. Institutions can also create emergency grants of less than a thousand dollars for students facing surprise costs like illness, job loss, or other unexpected situations. Emergency grant programs can be the difference between a student completing their degree, and postposing or leaving their degree uncompleted. Nearly all institutions provided such grants under the CARES Act emergency funding; they should take steps to institutionalize such initiatives next school year.

Faculty should consider adopting an open textbook, and think twice before assigning an access code or other digital material behind a paywall. Educators can take an active role in advocating for expanded open textbook use in their department, through their faculty senate, institution wide. When creating new educational material, educators should consider releasing their work under an open license.

When holding online or remote courses, educators can help lessen the digital divide by making lectures asynchronous or downloadable for students. They can also reject remote proctoring services which, on top of all their other serious privacy and discrimination concerns,[43] place students without reliable access to the internet at a heavy disadvantage.

Students can individually push for open textbooks through advocacy events on campus, or in conversation with faculty. Students can also volunteer for local basic needs efforts. Speaking to faculty or advising can also help individual students connect to local resources to fill needs gaps they may be experiencing. Although it should not be solely up to individual students to seek out and fill these needs, there must be a comprehensive plan from institution decision makers.

Student governments and organizations can advocate at the institutional level for

policies that support open textbook adoption and support student basic needs. Student governments can pass and publicize resolutions supporting new initiatives that incentivize open textbook adoption and creation.[44] Student groups across the country are currently working with campus media, creating student panels, and holding events to bring attention to the difficulties students face when they cannot afford assigned course materials. More student groups should join these efforts and coordinate across institutional and regional boundaries to amplify their message.

Student governments have also played key roles in creating services that fill student basic needs, from supporting mutual aid efforts to creating their own food pantries. Some student governments have also created small emergency grant programs to help students recover from unexpected situations that would otherwise make putting food on the table - or even completing their degree - difficult.

Student leaders can also work with their campus textbook affordability committee, often housed in the library, to educate faculty about open or free options. If a campus does not have such a task force, they can advocate for its creation.

Methodology

THIS STUDY CONSISTED OF a survey conducted between September and October 2020. Student PIRGs staff and students, student governments, and libraries conducted an anonymous multiple-choice and short answer survey via Google Forms. The survey closed with an open-ended question asking students to share any further thoughts about their textbook buying experiences. The survey questions can be found in Google Forms, and those interested in replicating the survey are welcome to make a copy of the Form for local edits and distribution.[45] The report authors encourage survey collectors to reach out to discuss best practices and develop a collection plan.

82 campuses across 19 states and the District of Columbia actively participated in coordinated survey response collection. That number comprises the core group of campuses where PIRG staff, student governments, and libraries prioritize survey collection, but beyond that, there were scattered responses from a student or two (who likely saw a social media post from a friend at one of our core institutions) at 325 institutions total. Ten of the 82 campuses were private, and 12 were community colleges. In our last survey, we aimed for at least a quarter of our responses to come from community colleges, but this year fell short of that metric. This is due to two key factors. First, students and libraries at a handful of four-year institutions went above and beyond the goals set for them. And second, as mentioned in our key findings, we undersampled first year students compared to previous year. At the point where this survey was taken in September, first year students across the country were still getting acclimated to their campus (primarily virtually), and were not as "plugged in" to the existing social networks on campus that we mobilized for survey collection. At community colleges, where first year students make up a much larger proportion of the student body compared to four-year institutions, those impacts on our sample demographics were felt more acutely; most community colleges in our sample did not hit their response goals.

We anticipated digital responses from a wide audience. As noted previously, we likely missed connecting with students with the most unreliable internet access, but given the circumstances of remote instruction, we had few ways to work around this. Historically, about 70 percent of responses for this survey have come from in-person outreach with a table in high-traffic areas of campus. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only caused a moment of crisis for college campuses, but also for our very hands-on method of community organizing. Based on our experiences running a remote internship program over the summer, where we tested new digital outreach tactics, we were still able to effectively mobilize our campuses on this effort. After eliminating duplicates and blank submissions, 5,823 responses formed our data set.

When respondents indicated the source of the survey, 58 percent of responses were from relational organizing - that is, having individual students reach out to their personal and academic networks on a campaign action. At our campuses with the most responses, students joined a Zoom for a relational organizing work block, where they leveraged their personal connections

to get survey responses. Breaking down those relational organizing activities further, 27 percent of all responses came from calls or texts from a friend, 14 percent from messages in a group chat,, 6 percent from a professor, and 11 percent from a social media post. After an initial relational organizing block on campus, PIRG staff reviewed responses to see if volunteers had over- or undersampled a certain population (i.e. part time students or business students), and helped the volunteers on the ground come up with a plan to create a more diverse sample of their campus. This might include prioritizing getting posts in the Class of 2025 Facebook page, or listservs in certain departments. Finally, emails to the entire student body, listservs, official university announcements, or other mailing lists were used to collect the remaining surveys.

Endnotes

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