FIXING THE BROKEN TEXTBOOK MARKET

SECOND EDITION

U.S. PIRG | Education Fund

FIXING THE BROKEN TEXTBOOK MARKET

Second Edition

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Student PIRGs

Students have the right and the responsibility to shape the future we will inherit. Our chapters on 35 campuses provide the training, professional support and resources students need to tackle climate change, protect public health, revitalize our democracy, feed the hungry and more. Students have been at the forefront of social change throughout history, from civil rights, to voting rights to protecting the environment. For nearly 50 years we've helped our campus communities get organized, mobilized and energized so they can continue to be on the cutting edge of positive change. For more information, please visit our website at www.studentpirgs.org.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FIXING THE BROKEN TEXTBOOK MARKET: SECOND EDITION
U.S. PIRG EDUCATION FUND

THE HIGH PRICE of college textbooks remains one of the most significant out of pocket expenses for students. The cost of textbooks has increased at three times the rate of inflation and although that trend seems to have plateaued in the past few years, the high barrier of overall cost remains.[1] The move from traditional print copies to temporary digital materials has eliminated many of the traditional cost saving measures students have historically employed. When students are forced to pay for an access code, which is an expiring login to a publisher platform that a student would use to submit their homework, the stakes are higher than ever.

So, how are high course material costs affecting students today? The Student PIRGs implemented a national survey in Fall 2019 to find out. We asked nearly 4,000 students to share their experiences with us, across 83 institutions serving over 500,000 students. We found that despite publishers' talking points that access codes and other digital materials have answered student's cries for help over costs, there has been little measurable improvement in key textbook affordability measures over the last six years. The broken textbook market continues to fail to meet student needs, and leaders at institutions of higher education should take further action to aid students.

1. Two-thirds of students continue to skip buying assigned textbooks. 66 percent of students reported skipping buying assigned course material - a textbook, and access code, or both - during their time at school because of its cost. Alone, 63 percent of students skipped buying or renting a textbook. This is nearly the same as our last national survey.

2. About one in five students skip buying access codes necessary to complete assignments. 17 percent of students reported skipping buying an access code. While fewer students go without access codes compared to the number that go without textbooks, the risk of this decision is higher because access codes contain essential tests, assignments, and other required class materials. As a result, any student that chooses to opt out is likely putting themselves on track to fail the class.

3. Almost every respondent worried forgoing these materials would impact their grade. When asked if the student was concerned that not purchasing the textbook or access code would negatively impact their grade, 90 percent said yes. This worry indicates students know and understand the risk of not purchasing access to course materials, yet consistently opt to not purchase them.

4. The cost of course materials has a broad impact on the lives of students. High materials cost impacts are felt beyond the grade. Some of these choices relate to the student's ability to succeed in class while others have impacts outside of the classroom.

- **25 percent** of all surveyed students reported needing to work extra hours to afford course materials.

- **22 percent** of all surveyed students prioritized purchasing access codes over other course materials.

- **19 percent** of all surveyed students have made decisions on which classes to take because of materials cost.

- **11 percent** of all surveyed students report skipping meals due to materials costs

5. Students are unaware of their data privacy and use by ed tech companies. We asked students to rate their understanding of how publishers and education technology companies use student data on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being fully aware and able to explain to a peer. The typical student rated their understanding as a median of 2, showing a very poor understanding of how their information is used by ed tech companies and publishers, who bury such information in long and often confusing terms of service agreements.[2]

Conclusion

Course materials continue to pose a financial barrier to student success. Despite recent price fluctuations in the textbook market, students skip purchasing materials and experience the ill effects of high textbook costs at approximately the same rates as before the transition to digital materials. High costs impact more than grades in individual classes, and spill into students' ability to meet their basic needs.

With the rise of access codes, many students are being priced out of participating in class, especially since homework can be up to 20 percent of their grade. The move to digital also provides new challenges and questions on the front of student data privacy.

Since our last survey, we've seen the large payoff from the hard work of educators, librarians, states, and administrators who have worked to encourage the adoption of open textbooks. In an area where expiring materials have not led to price relief for students, solutions like open textbooks are still very much needed to deliver guaranteed savings.

Recommendations

Legislatures and education agencies should provide funding for free and open textbook programs, and act to restrict the use of access codes and other commercial materials that pose threats to student affordability, equity, and access.

Higher education institutions and systems should continue to build infrastructure - grants, 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.

Faculty should consider adopting an open textbook and think twice before assigning an access code. They should take student data privacy into consideration when assigning digital materials or tools.

Students should individually advocate for open textbooks and push back against products that collect and potentially sell their data. Student governments and organizations can advocate at the local level for policies that support open textbook adoption and protect student's digital data. Other actions include setting up student run textbook exchanges, expanding course reserves with their library, and creating forums for students to share their experiences.

Background on the broken textbook market

OVER THE PAST FEW DECADES, textbook prices increased at three times the rate of inflation, outpaced even the rising costs of tuition.[3] Colleges across the country recommend that students set aside well over a thousand dollars per year for textbooks.[4] While that long term trend of skyrocketing costs appears to have plateaued, textbooks remain one of the highest - and often unexpected - out of pocket costs of pursuing higher education. Especially for community college and non-traditional students, spending several hundreds of dollars can be a crushing expense that forces them to make hard choices about paying bills, putting food on the table, and taking enough courses to be on track for graduation.

There are a few different factors that contribute to the steep and sustained climb in textbook prices. The clearest is the lack of meaningful competition in the textbook market. College students are a captured market: while they sometimes have choice over the format they purchase a book in, they have no control over the actual title assigned by the professor. If their class assigned a specific organic chemistry textbook, the student still must buy the book assigned, even if another publisher has a similar organic chemistry book at a lower price. The student risks failing the class if they do not purchase the specific assigned material. Simply put, if we were assigned an Introductory Economics textbook, that book would tell us the basic principles of supply and demand in this market were broken.

Taking full advantage of their position of power in this broken market, publishers have used tactics like publishing new editions, bundling books with access codes, and custom editions to suppress cheaper alternatives and keep prices high. Further complicating that dynamic, only three companies control 80 percent of the college textbook market. This lack of competition means that publishers are able to raise prices with few other checks on their power.[5]

Changing landscape since our 2014 survey

WHILE MANY OF THESE historic issues continue to plague college students, the recent fluctuations in college textbook prices can be attributed to two big changes.

Open textbooks become commonplace

Open textbooks have been part of the learning landscape of college campuses since the early 2000s and have experienced a steady increase in support and adoption. Open textbooks "reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions".[6] Open textbooks are earning materials written by faculty, like traditional commercial textbooks. However, the open license makes them more flexible, allowing professors to revise material and allowing students and educators to retain access after the end of the term.

Open textbooks and the broader open educational resources (OER), which includes modules, videos, quizzes, and other supplemental materials, have the potential to replace access codes when imported into an institution's learning management system. As their support has grown through grants and other incentives, so has their impact. Currently, open textbooks are being used at half of the US and Canada's universities and colleges[7] and have saved students $1 billion.[8]

Access Denied: a publishing industry strategy of paywalls and expiring access

Although the textbook market has rapidly moved from the page to the screen, that shift was still in its early stages during our last national survey. We first fully addressed the new product in 2016 with our report *Access Denied*.[9] Access codes allow students onto a publisher platform giving students expiring access to digital books, homework assignments, quizzes, tests, attendance, and/or other course content. Access codes are typically only viable for a single term for one student, and so cannot be shared or resold once "opened." Students lose access to the materials at the end of the term.
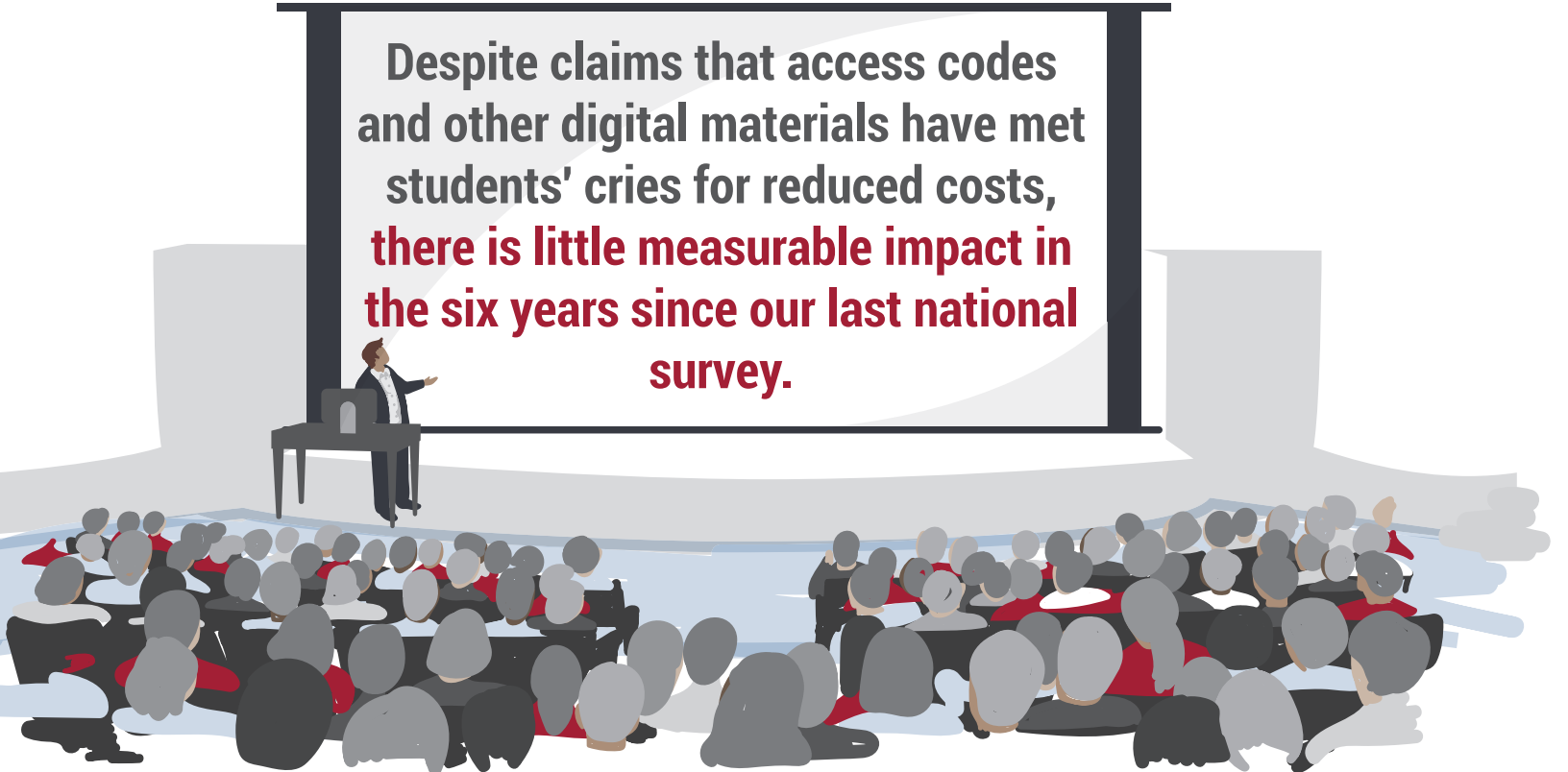
While access codes are less expensive, coming in at an average cost of $100, they completely eliminate the alternative book markets that students rely on to get the best deals.[10] Historic alternative markets include used book stores, book rentals, social media for-sale pages, university library course reserves, and even sharing with classmates. Expiring access also means that students cannot choose to retain their materials at the end of the course for further study and reference.

Automatic Textbook Billing: an offer students can't refuse?

Publishers have taken several steps to lock in their place in the market and increase the use of access codes. "Inclusive access" automatic billing programs have expanded, despite real threats to faculty and student choice, and great uncertainty in the permanence of purported discounts and an adequate level of price transparency.[11] In 2019, Pearson announced their "digital first" strategy, an organized shift in focus from updating and putting out new additions of print books to focus on ebooks.[12] Cengage, meanwhile, announced a subscription service that gives students access to digital materials at

a flat rate for the entire catalogue.[13] These moves to increase the use of access codes are, according to the publishers, all in pursuit of savings for students.[14] But have those promises actually resulted in meaningful change for students?

Despite claims that access codes and other digital materials have met students' cries for reduced costs, there is little measurable impact in the six years since our last national survey.

Key Findings

IT HAS BEEN SIX YEARS since our last national survey of how textbook costs affect students. As access codes replaced textbooks across introductory classes, how has the situation changed? With the rise of access codes and digital e-book rentals, there have been by some measures modest - and possibly temporary - gains in affordability, but at the expense of consumer protection and choice,[15] and with no real change in the number of students who skip buying materials due to cost.

In the fall of 2019, student governments, libraries, and Student PIRG chapters collected nearly four thousand survey responses from their peers. We used a similar set of questions to our 2014 survey, with additional questions on digital materials. While some student leaders used email to share their survey link, most of our volunteers approached students randomly in dining halls, student unions, and passing between classes to get a random sample of their campuses. A full breakdown of survey collection practices and the basic demographics for the sample used in this survey is in the methodology section.

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

66 percent of all surveyed students skipped buying or renting course materials at some point in their college career because of cost, and more specifically, 63 percent skipped buying a textbook. For comparison, in 2014, 65 percent of students skipped buying books.

If a student makes the choice to skip buying course materials, it is a conscious and informed decision to prioritize paying bills

over an A in the class. In the past, if a student could not afford a textbook, they might be able to make copies of the homework questions from a library reserve copy or from a friend's book, and therefore access homework for free. With access codes, these free alternatives are no longer possible.

63% of students skipped buying or renting a textbook.
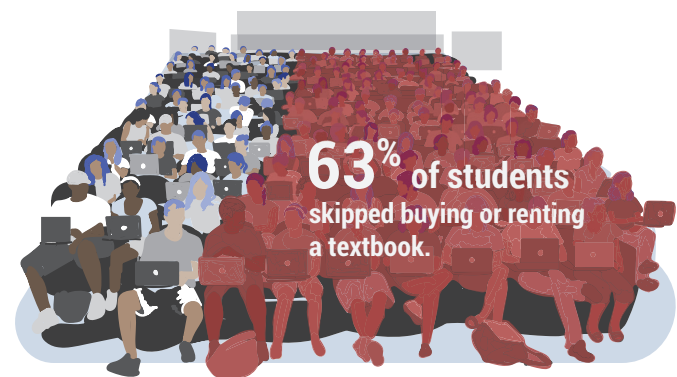
Key Finding 2: Students skip buying access codes and forgo completing required assignments.

17 percent of all students surveyed reported skipping buying an access code. While significantly lower than the percent that skip purchasing the other types of materials, there is often a direct impact on the grade because without the password to assignments that the access code provides, students cannot turn in required assignments.

**17%** of students reported skipping buying an access code.
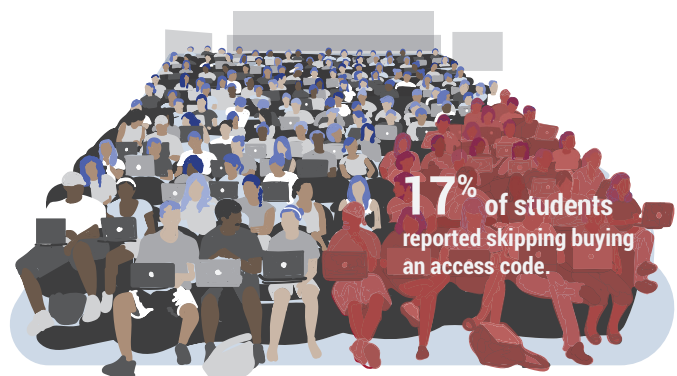
Students have always made hard choices based on their financial situation and their desire to graduate. Historically that might mean taking fewer classes to have time for a job, or taking as many classes as possible to graduate on a faster timeline. There are now students who are calculating what percentage of their grade they can afford to lose if they cannot afford the assigned access code.

Automatic grading, digital homework help, analytics of student response - the appeal of access codes are clear. What is also clear is that 17 percent of students cannot afford to fully participate in class.

Key Finding 3: Students skip purchasing materials despite the worry that it directly impacts their grade

When asked if the student were concerned that not purchasing course materials would negatively impact their grade, 90 percent said yes for textbooks and 92 percent said yes for access codes.

90% of students worried forgoing these course materials would negatively impact their grade.
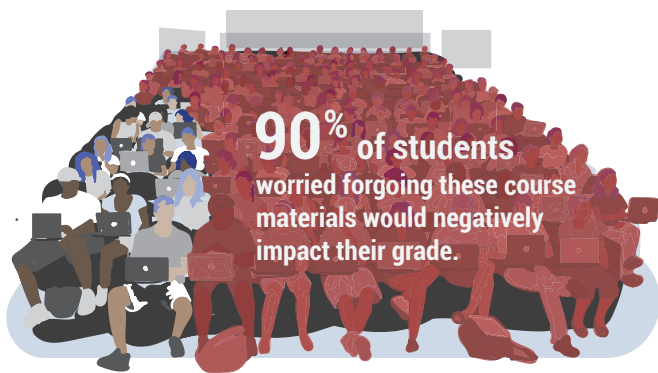
The concern students have for not buying an access code makes sense. In many classes, access codes aren't simple supplemental materials - it is how students access homework, quizzes, and potentially even attendance tests. If students do not buy the access code, they may not be able to complete a significant portion of their graded assignments.

Key Finding 4: Textbook costs affect students ability to meet their basic needs and graduate on time.

High course materials cost impacts go beyond the student's grade. Students are regularly making the difficult choice between the shot at an A, and paying the bills.

- **22 percent** of all students surveyed report prioritizing access codes over other forms of course materials. In other words, the choice to purchase access to their homework in one class is potentially hurting their grades in others.

- **19 percent** of all students surveyed have made decisions on which class sections to take based on the cost of their course materials.

- **7 percent** of all students surveyed reported dropping a class if they could not afford the materials.

- **3 percent** of all students surveyed reported failing a class due to their inability to afford the assigned materials.

The impact of course materials costs spills outside of the classroom, and places additional stress on students who are already struggling to balance study time with meeting basic needs.

- **25 percent** of all students surveyed reported needing to work extra hours to afford course materials

- **11 percent** of all students surveyed report skipping meals due to materials costs

- **9 percent** of all students surveyed have missed a bill payment.

### Key Finding 5: Students are unaware of how digital course materials use their data

One of the biggest shifts in the textbook

market from the 2014 survey is the rise of access codes. As with social media and other websites, students have a low recognition of what data is collected and how it could be used.

Before accessing their materials, students must sign the terms of service agreements which lay out what information the publishers may access, store, analyze, and share among other things. Students assigned an access code must agree to these terms to access the required materials for the class. As others have noted, the terms of service for access codes commit students to sharing details of their activity with publishers and other ed tech companies. Even if this data is de-identified from the individual students, it could be matched with other third-party databases, leading some to worry that assigning access codes is tantamount to signing students up for surveillance.[16] Students are paying not only with their wallets for these digital materials, but potentially with their data if publishers are able to find ways to use and market it to third parties. This is a potential - and lucrative - new frontier for ed tech companies.[17]

We asked surveyed students to grade themselves on a scale of 1-10 for understanding how their data is used, with 1 being a poor understanding and 10 being perfect understanding and the ability to communicate data collection policies to a peer. The typical student rated their understanding at the low end of that scale, with the median rating of 2.

Students are unaware of data collection and use by ed tech companies. **On a scale of 1 to 10, students rate themselves as a 2**
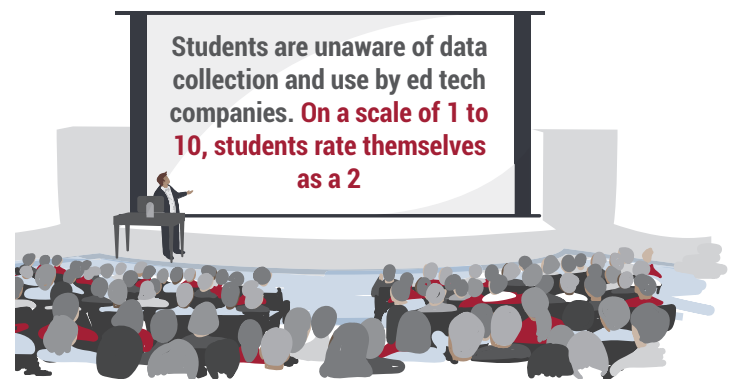
There is little doubt that students are continuing to press the "I Accept" button on an access code's terms of service to access their required homework and quizzes without reading or understanding the fine print. Most students are not data privacy experts. When there is a very real threat of not being able to access homework, what incentive is there for students to wade into the cumbersome and legalistic world of terms of service agreements? If they do find something they object to, we ask: is there any meaningful way for them to resolve their concerns and access their assigned materials? Given the many other demands on a student's time and resources, pushing back on these data privacy concerns is currently a low priority for many students.

Conclusion

HAVE THINGS REALLY CHANGED SINCE OUR 2014 SURVEY ?

The textbooks market has shifted towards more access codes and digital materials, but the financial challenges faced by students have not. In 2014, 65 percent of students reported not buying an assigned book, while 66 percent of students reported not buying some of their assigned materials in 2019. And even worse, we've documented that an alarming 17 percent of students report skipping access codes at some point - which possibly results in lower grade performance or failure.

This means that despite the purported 14 percent price drop in traditional textbooks by some measures,[18, 19] very little has appeared to have changed in the students' experiences.

With this shift comes a whole new set of emerging concerns around student data and how it is collected, used, stored, and potentially shared.

The student response to the question on awareness of data collection and use begs the questions:

- What can be done to make sure students are fully informed on how the education technology is collecting, storing, and sharing their data?

- If a student objects to an aspect of the terms of service agreement, is there a meaningful process to opt out without sacrificing their academic standing?

- Are professors given the tools to fully understand the content of these agreements, or the ability to change them?

- What trade-offs, particularly in terms of consumer protection, equity, and access, are being made as part of textbook affordability programs such as "inclusive access" automatic billing partnerships?

The adoption of access codes - which, as our survey shows, have delivered little relief for students from being forced to skip buying materials - seems likely to continue thanks to the spread of automatic billing. These programs automatically charge student accounts for the cost of textbooks and access codes in a partnership between the publisher and the institution, facilitated by the billing office and sometimes campus bookstore.[20] Unless there are dramatic cuts to access code use and the number of automatic billing programs, students will continue to struggle under the burden of high course materials costs.

Recommendations

Legislatures and education agencies should provide funding for free and open textbook programs, and act to restrict the use of access codes and other commercial materials that pose threats to student affordability and access. State legislatures and Departments of Education from New York[21] to Washington[22] (and many other states in between) have created programs funding open textbook adoption grants, professional development, and course marking policies with exciting results.

The Zero Textbook Cost Degree Program was funded in 2017 by the California legislature[23] to create clear pathways to a degree where a student would not need to purchase textbooks or access codes to achieve their degree. The program has not only saved students a large amount of money but also reports positive impacts on student grades and completion.[24]

Other states have opted for large professional development programs or grants. In 2011, UMass Amherst launched an open textbook grant program for educators interested in adopting open educational materials.[25] After the success of the local program, in an effort to scale up its success, the Massachusetts Department of Education awarded UMass Amherst, along with partner state colleges and community colleges, a grant to build out capacity for open adoptions throughout the state.[26] With this grant, they launched a series of workshops and work sessions to create openly licensed materials and review existing materials, and created a working group to advise the Department on policy recommendations for a statewide program.[27]

State legislatures and agencies have a broad range of options for using their resources to cut material costs for students through driving open textbook adoptions, and should look for the best fit for their institutions and their strategic priorities for student success.[28]

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. 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.

To support students making challenging financial decisions, institutions can add price transparency for course materials into the course catalogue during the registration process. Some schools do this by including the full cost of materials in the course information or by adding a low cost designation for courses under a set price threshold.[29]

Faculty should consider adopting an open textbook,[30] 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.

In addition to considerations around cost, educators should take student data privacy into consideration when assigning digital materials or tools. Faculty can read through the terms of service agreements students would need to sign and be sure they agree that collected data points are necessary for the class, that students retain the copyrights to their own work, and that there are meaningful options for students who object to the terms of service.[31]

Students can individually advocate for open textbooks through events on campus or in conversation with faculty. Students should also carefully read their terms of service agreements for digital materials and ask questions to faculty about parts they don't understand or object to.
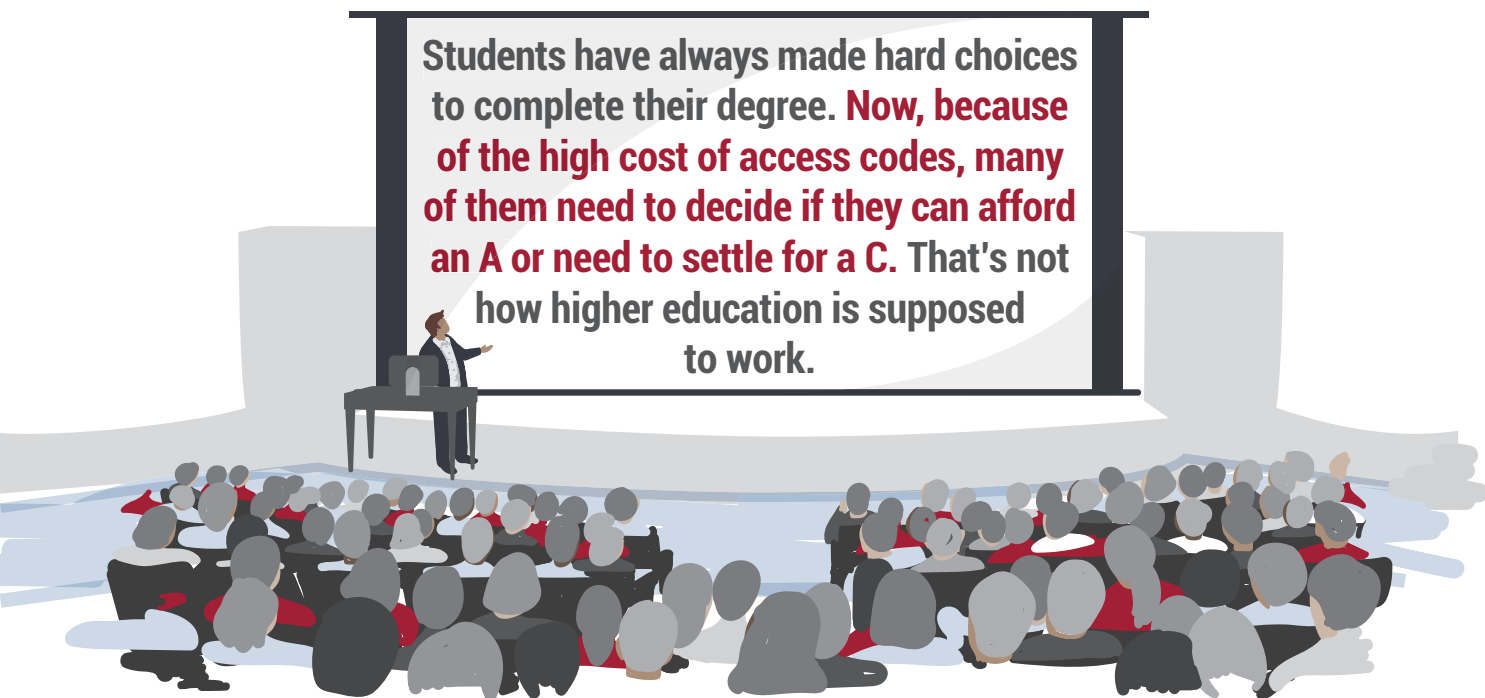
Student governments and organizations can advocate at the local level for policies that support open textbook adoption and protect student's digital data. Student governments can pass and publicize resolutions supporting open textbook adoption and program creation. Student groups across the country are 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.[32]

Student leaders can also work with their campus OER taskforce to educate faculty about open or free options. If a campus does not have an OER taskforce, they can advocate for its creation.

Student groups concerned with the data privacy aspect of digital course materials can work to pass policies to allow students to opt out of education technology tracking or storing their data. They could also advocate for the terms to more simply and clearly define what is being tracked and how it is being used.

Other actions students have taken include setting up student run textbook exchanges, expanding course reserves with their library, and including school supplies in campus food banks.

Students have always made hard choices to complete their degree. **Now, because of the high cost of access codes, many of them need to decide if they can afford an A or need to settle for a C.** That's not how higher education is supposed to work.

Methodology

THIS STUDY CONSISTED OF a survey conducted between September and November 2019. 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.[33] The report authors encourage survey collectors to reach out to discuss best practices and develop a collection plan.

83 campuses across 19 states and the District of Columbia participated, sampling a student population of more than 500,000. The core group of campuses where PIRG staff and student governments prioritize survey collection aimed for one quarter of the surveyable population to be from private four year institutions, half from public four year institutions, and another quarter from public two-year institutions. Beyond that, we anticipated digital responses from a wide audience.

When respondents indicated the source of the survey, 70 percent were collected by PIRG volunteers, student governments, and libraries at tables in busy areas of campus. Tablers would randomly approach passerby and ask them to stop and take a two minute survey. All participants were asked to use a standard script during interactions to avoid biasing responses, and were asked to refrain from using signs and props that promoted a stance on textbook affordability, such as promoting open textbooks. These responses

TOP 20 CAMPUSES WHO PARTICIPATED
UConn
UMass Amherst
University of Maryland at College Park
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
UC Santa Barbara
UC Santa Cruz
Tufts University
UMass Boston
Rutgers University
Eckerd College
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
College of Saint Scholastica
UMass Dartmouth
University of Oregon
George Washington University
University of South Florida
University of Washington
UCLA
Durham Tech Community College

were collected via Google Forms on a laptop on the table, by QR code, or by URL. After an initial table on campus, PIRG staff reviewed responses to see if the tablers had oversampled a certain population (i.e. first year 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. Finally, emails to the entire student body or volunteer lists were used to collect surveys where tables were not possible. Beyond email, volunteers posted on their personal and organizational social media profiles to get additional responses. The final 30 percent of survey responses came from digital outreach.

After eliminating duplicates and blank submissions, 3,902 responses formed our data set. There was a slight oversampling of first year students, but given the number of community colleges that were part of our data set, we feel this is an accurate representation of the populations of our campuses. 85 percent of students identified as full time (four or more classes).
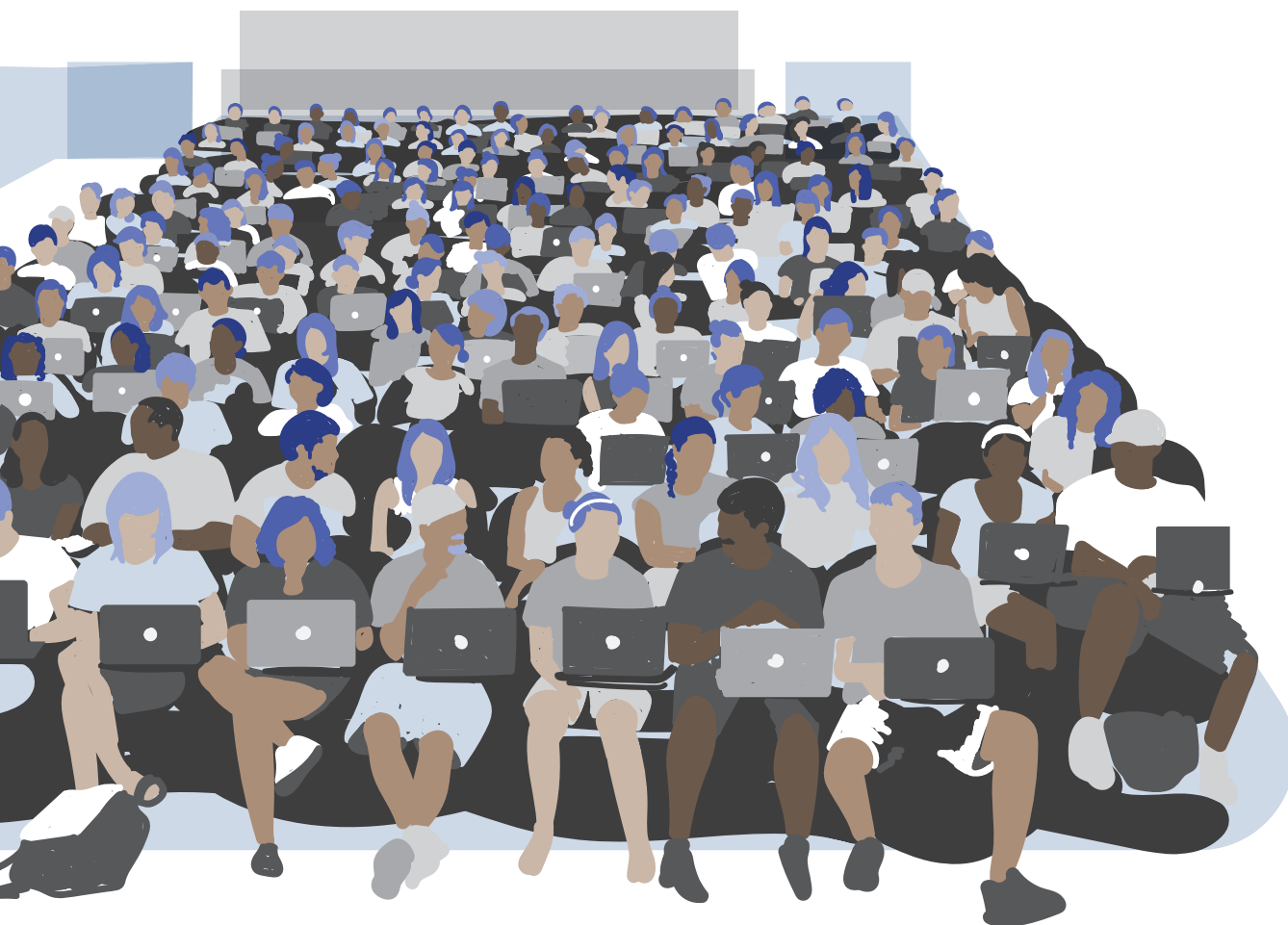
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