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### Supporting an Inclusive and Equitable Classroom: Student Perspectives on a Textbook Affordability Initiative

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**Title:** Supporting an Inclusive and Equitable Classroom: Student Perspectives on a Textbook Affordability Initiative

**Authors:** Julie A. Murphy, Rachel E. Scott, Anne Shelley, Mallory Jallas, Rachel Park

This is the accepted (post-peer review, pre-copyedited) version of a manuscript which has been accepted for publication in *portal: Libraries & the Academy* (accepted: April 29, 2023; expected publication: April 2024).

**Abstract:** As academic librarians become aware of the challenges expensive textbooks pose to student success, they increasingly collaborate to provide zero-cost access to required course materials. Librarians at Illinois State University initiated a program to license e-books assigned in courses, surveying students and faculty in participating courses regarding their perspectives on textbook affordability and their experiences with the provided e-books. Student participants reported overwhelmingly positive responses and identified several ways in which the e-books enhanced their experience in the course. The findings suggest that providing assigned materials as e-books contributes to students' engagement as learners and their academic success within courses.

## **Introduction**

Students' finances are critical to their academic engagement and success.<sup>1</sup> Academic librarians are increasingly aware of financial insecurity as an obstacle to the success of their students, and many are accordingly engaged in the work of removing or mitigating these obstacles. At Illinois State University (ISU), recent strategic initiatives explicitly and holistically support the success of students. A variety of positions, services, and spaces have recently been created to support student success, including the new position of student success librarian, which was filled in July 2020. In Fall 2020, a group of librarians—including the student success librarian—at ISU began meeting regularly to discuss what support Milner Library could provide to students with respect to the growing problem of textbook affordability. Librarians have addressed the issue of costly textbooks in a variety of ways—from funding Open Educational Resources (OER) initiatives, facilitating textbook swapping, purchasing assigned materials, offering electronic and physical course reserves, and publishing assigned materials, among other options. The authors took stock of local needs and resources before developing a plan.

The scholarly communication librarian had initially secured \$10,000 to promote and fund the creation of OER on campus, but when administrative issues precluded that course of action, the group received permission to use these funds to license electronic books (e-books) that were required course materials. In spring 2021, the authors—librarians representing five departments at Milner Library—initiated a pilot program to license texts assigned in ISU courses as e-books. The librarians conducted focus groups and surveyed students and faculty in participating courses regarding their perspectives on textbook affordability and their experiences with the provided e-books. Student participants reported overwhelmingly positive responses to having access to these texts at no additional cost. Students highlighted several ways in which access to assigned course materials is an equity issue, and one that has profound implications for who is positioned to thrive from the outset and who will struggle to catch up.

The 2019 report *Open and Equitable Scholarly Communications: Creating a More Inclusive Future* calls for progress in the “development of strategies that promote not only openness but also inclusion and equity. Such strategies include, for example, leveraging libraries’ purchasing power to provide broad access to online materials.”<sup>2</sup> This project reflects on librarians’ work to do precisely that: use available funds and leverage existing workflows to provide access to e-books that are assigned in courses with the goal of promoting a more inclusive, equitable, and engaging classroom experience. The authors have published articles offering faculty perspectives on textbook assignment and affordability and the value of course assigned e-books from a collections perspective.<sup>3</sup> This paper presents findings from a survey conducted in the spring 2021 semester that investigated student experiences with and perspectives on textbook affordability. By shifting their focus to students, the authors consider

how cost-free access to assigned texts creates a more inclusive and participatory learning environment. The authors explore three research questions:

1. How did students perceive the experience of having access to and using library-licensed e-book(s)?
2. How did having e-book(s) provided change students' impressions of Milner Library?
3. How did having e-book(s) provided impact students' academic success?

### **Literature Review**

Librarians have long been part of conversations about textbook affordability and have performed a variety of roles related to textbook affordability. Most notably, perhaps, librarians have demonstrated that library course reserves—whether print or digital— make textbooks more accessible to students.<sup>4</sup> In addition, librarians have partnered with teaching faculty to facilitate OER programs at their institutions.<sup>5</sup> There has also been an acknowledgement, however, that because the instructor of record selects assigned texts, librarians might be better served by focusing on affordability initiatives or attempting to support both OER and affordability.<sup>6</sup> A good amount of the library literature on textbook affordability has focused on the potential savings to students.<sup>7</sup> A few librarian-led studies have investigated student perspectives beyond cost savings; the study at hand aims to enrich and expand this literature.<sup>8</sup>

A growing literature details student perspectives on zero-cost textbooks. Periodic surveys conducted by the Florida Virtual Campus offer over 20,000 student responses to questions about the amount of money spent on textbooks and course materials, the frequency with which students buy unused textbooks, how the cost of textbooks affects students, and what materials students find most beneficial to their learning.<sup>9</sup> Early studies documented student perceptions about the quality of OER and the impact on their learning.<sup>10</sup> Teaching faculty have authored studies that focus on the integration of cost-free materials into their courses and the resultant implications for

course design and delivery.<sup>11</sup> Quantitative studies explicitly explore the impact of OER and zero-cost texts on student success metrics.<sup>12</sup>

Obstacles surrounding textbook affordability parallel existing inequities in higher education. To cite one example: “barriers were even more significant among historically underserved college students; thus, confirming textbook affordability as a redistributive justice issue, and positing OER as a potential avenue for realizing a more socially just college experience.”<sup>13</sup> Lucinda Rush Wittkower and Leo S. Lo further demonstrate that student demographics, work-study status, and hours worked per week shape perspectives on the cost of course materials: “When asked how they usually pay for their course materials each semester, the most selected answer (61 percent) was students using money earned from a work-study or outside job. It is, therefore, likely that students who have to work and have to use their work earnings on course materials would be more sensitive to the cost than those who do not work.”<sup>14</sup>

The findings of Wittkower and Lo echo results from a student survey conducted at ISU in spring 2019.<sup>15</sup> That survey sought to determine the extent to which textbook costs are a problem for ISU students. The results indicated that 89 percent of students delayed purchasing a textbook or another course material due to cost, and that rate was 8 percent higher for students of color compared to white students. Funds for the purchase of assigned materials also showed racial disparities, with 43 percent of Black students using work money to purchase assigned materials compared to 34 percent of white students. The 2019 ISU student survey data provided evidence that the cost of textbooks was a hardship to many students and that such a barrier compounded existing inequities. This study documents how a specific intervention—licensing assigned texts as e-books—impacted student learners at ISU and addressed the inequity of costly course materials.

## **Method**

### ***Institution***

ISU is a public university in the Midwestern United States with a Carnegie classification of Doctoral Universities: High Research Activity. The fall 2020 total enrollment was 20,770, of which 15 percent identified as First Generation and 6 percent registered as students with disabilities. The authors first met in August 2020 to discuss how best to address the issue of textbook affordability from their respective positions in Milner Library. They received permission to use \$10,000 funding to license texts assigned in the spring 2021 as e-books. The collection assessment librarian identified eligible courses based on the availability of institutional licenses with unlimited simultaneous users and a high ratio of potential student savings relative to the licensing cost.

The Institutional Review Board at ISU reviewed the study, including all survey and focus group instruments, and determined it to be exempt. Instructors of record from fifty-two sections elected to participate in the study. The details of calculating the benefit-cost ratio, identifying and licensing e-books, and faculty perspectives on assigning texts and textbook affordability are provided in separate papers and will not be detailed here.<sup>16</sup> The results and analysis of student focus groups are also not included. This paper focuses exclusively on student survey findings and the survey instrument is provided in Appendix A. The authors employed ATLAS.ti to analyze free-response questions to identify themes and count the prevalence of statements that aligned with these themes.

### ***Participant Demographics***

The authors encouraged faculty to invite students in participating spring 2021 courses to complete a survey about their experiences with textbook affordability, the provided e-books, and Milner Library. The response rate was 20 percent, and respondents included students from sixty-one majors across twenty-eight of ISU’s forty-one academic departments. Eighty-nine percent reported that the course was required for their degree. The spring 2021 enrollment of 19,218 was distributed across the University’s colleges as shown in figure 1. Figure 2 shows the class of participants relative to the overall enrollment. These figures clearly demonstrate the over-representation students from the College of Education and Mennonite College of Nursing and of juniors, which can be explained by the availability of institutional e-book licenses for courses in those colleges and at that level. Participants who identified as Black or African-American (4 percent compared to 9 percent of University enrollment) or Hispanic (5 percent compared to 11 percent of University enrollment) were underrepresented in this study and those who identify as female were disproportionately represented in this study—almost 72 percent compared to 58 percent University-wide.

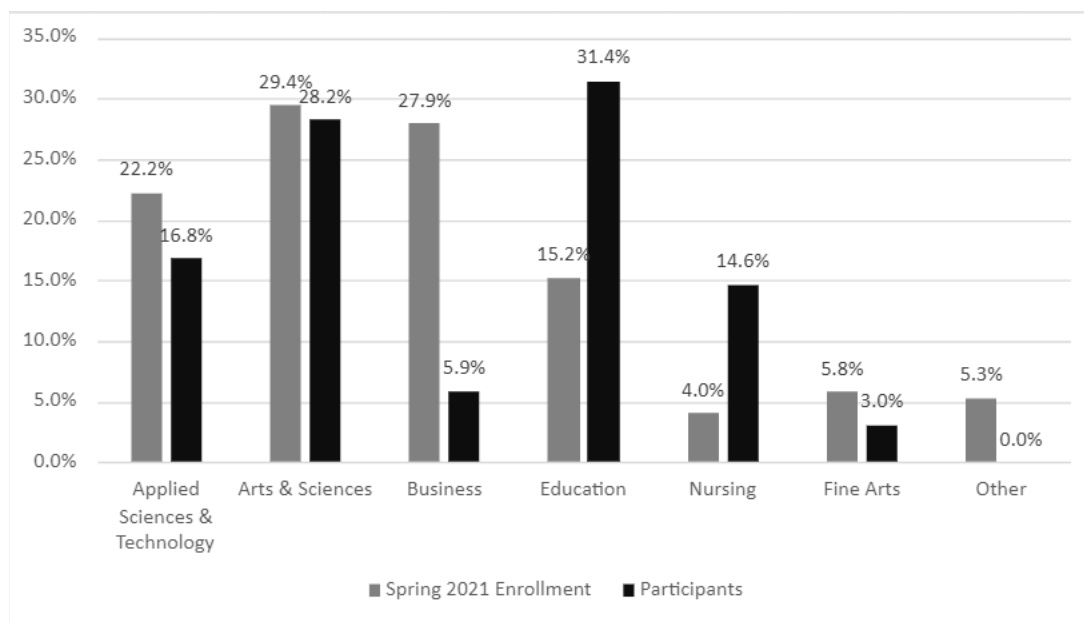


Figure 1. Students by College: Participants (n=404) vs. Spring 2021 Enrollment (n=19, 218)

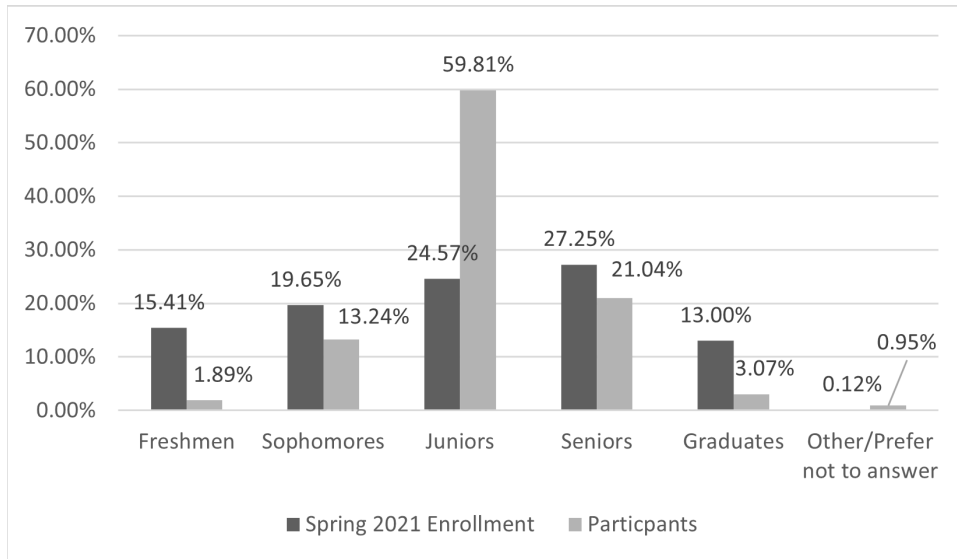


Figure 2. Students by Year : Participants (n=423) vs. Spring 2021 Enrollment (n=19,218)

### Limitations

This paper reports findings from a pilot project and not a study executed in a controlled environment. Accordingly, the participants were not randomly selected and are not necessarily representative of broader campus populations. Study participants identifying as white, women, and undergraduate juniors are disproportionate to campus populations—this is especially important to acknowledge due to the framing of the article towards inclusion and equity. Respondents participated voluntarily, but they knew that librarians were conducting the research and may have answered questions more positively out of a sense of politeness or gratitude for having received cost-free text(s).

### Results

*RQ1. How did students perceive the experience of having access to and using library-licensed e-book(s)?*



In order to contextualize students' experience with the library-provided e-books, the authors posed several questions about students' typical experiences with course assigned materials more broadly. Of 426 responses to the question of what percentage of their textbooks they typically purchase, the average was 71.5 percent with a minimum value of zero, a maximum of 100 percent, and a standard deviation of 27.18. Both a Kolmogorov-Smirnov and a Shapiro-Wilk test of normality returned p-values of  $< .001$ , which combined with the histogram (figure 3), strongly suggest a non-normal distribution.

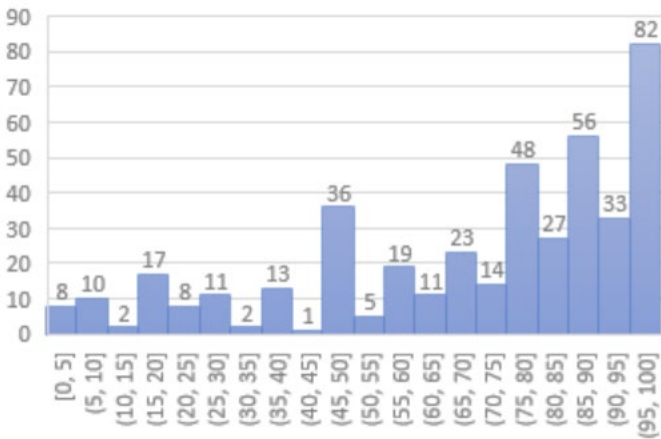


Figure 3. Percentage of Textbooks Typically Purchased – Histogram

Because the data is non-normal and the distributions by gender are not the same shape, a Kruskal-Wallis H Test was employed to compare the mean ranks of each gender. The Kruskal-Wallis H test (figure 4) shows a statistically significant difference in the percentage of textbooks purchased between the different genders,  $\chi^2(3) = 27.116$ ,  $p < .001$ , with mean rank scores for participants who identify as women (75.13), male (62.64), and nonbinary (61.6).

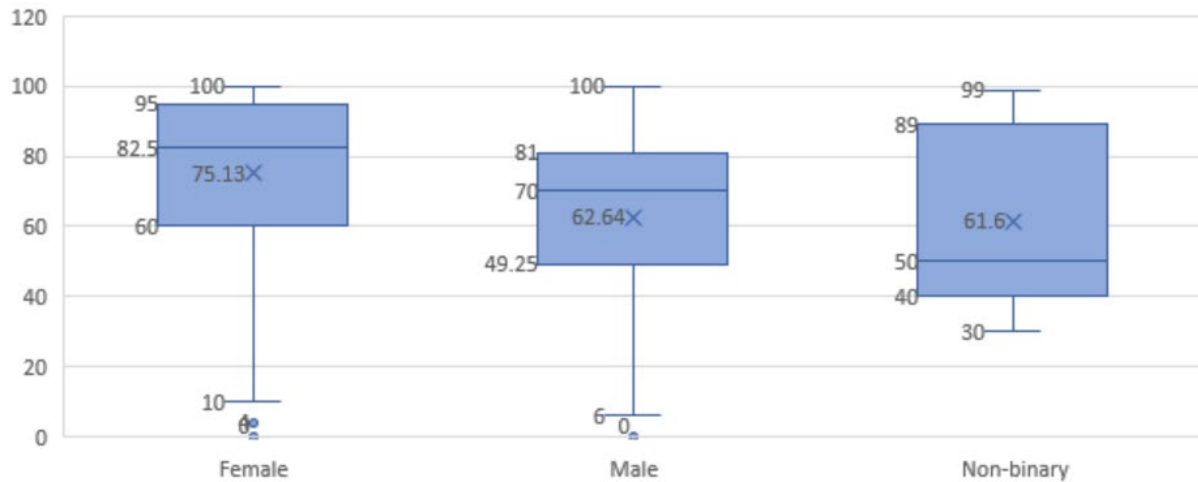


Figure 4. Percentage of Textbooks Typically Purchased by Gender

Students reported multiple approaches and considerations when deciding if, when, and how to acquire assigned texts. To the question of “if,” 126 students always buy required texts, forty always buy all books, thirty-seven buy the book if it is required for completing assigned work or assessments, three buy if an access code is necessary, three never buy textbooks, and one buys used texts and returns them afterward. Participants reported making a variety of considerations before acquiring materials, including: taking the recommendation of their professor into account, examining the syllabus to evaluate how much the book would be used, asking previous students or checking RateMyProfessor to determine whether the book will be necessary, finding textbooks for free online, investigating the price, delaying the purchase of textbooks until after the first day—sometimes multiple weeks afterward, buying only the books they believe will be useful for them in future classes or their career, buying books only for classes in their major, and considering the importance or difficulty of the class as a factor. How texts are acquired varies as well, with participants reporting renting some or all books, checking the library for their textbooks, trying to find their texts for free online, borrowing or sharing books with friends or classmates, and preferring e-books if they are cheaper than print. Searching

for the best price is a time-consuming and taxing venture: “Without the stress of running around to find a textbook at a reasonable price, I was able to dive into the course and semester right away with no hesitation. It has allowed me to prepare and do well in all tests and other assignments thus far.”

Participants overwhelmingly liked the library-provided e-book(s) because they were free (81 percent), easy to use (61 percent), and allowed keyword searches (49 percent). Participants also noted they could save and/or annotate the e-books (28 percent) and find related materials in the library databases (28 percent). Those who selected “Other” noted they could access the e-book from anywhere, it gave them a smoother start to the class, and it reduced anxiety and stress. Participants less frequently identified challenges in using the e-books. The survey did not include an option for no challenges, which led to only 366 students responding to this question, thus artificially inflating the percentages of the challenges reported. Ten percent used the “other” option to indicate that they had had no problems at all. Those who responded reported difficulties in use (40 percent), downloading or annotation (27 percent), and access (17 percent).

The most positive aspect of the provided e-books, mentioned by over half of participants, was the convenience of access. A representative comment was “I like the convenience of them because I can search keywords to try and get to that section. They are also very easy to use and gives me what is necessary.” The financial benefit was mentioned by almost half of the participants and several comments drew a relationship between finances and stress. At least five participants specifically mentioned that having the text provided meant they did not have to work additional hours: “It allowed me to focus more on course material instead of picking up extra hours at work to replace the lost income.”

Several mentions had to do with how students engaged with the material or learned. Having free access to the e-books allowed participants to: gain a better understanding of material or learning, complete assigned work, study more effectively, facilitate completing assigned work, do better on assigned work and assessments, read and use the book more, follow along or keep on top of the class better, feel more prepared, participate from “day one” (first day of class), improve their organization, increase their engagement with the course, and enhance their work ethic. Representative comments include: “It was easy to use an e-book during an online class because I was able to search for anything I needed” and “It made me more successful in my course. I am also able to copy and paste notes directly onto my study guide from the book, saving time.”

Another thematic area dealt with the features and function of e-books: they are easy to use, have useful search tools, helped students answer questions or easily find information, are helpful/valuable resources, include helpful tools such as annotation or highlighting, and make taking notes easier. A final group of responses had to do with affective or personal elements: they offer time savings, students do not have to carry heavy books around (all from women-identifying participants), improved focus on school work, increased motivation, offered a better start to the semester or better view of the class, are available to all, and create a more equitable experience. Like faculty participants, several students suggested that having the e-books provided created “no excuse not to” do reading or work because of the access to the book.<sup>17</sup> The perceived negatives were minimal; a few students mentioned screen fatigue or difficulty navigating e-books and one mentioned lag while using the e-book.

When the quantitative and qualitative, or open-ended, results are considered in conjunction, several noteworthy findings surfaced. Normalized gender data analysis showed that

those who identify as women were almost three times as likely to indicate they did more reading, used the e-book more, or were more likely to use it. Only women reported sharing textbooks with friends, having a better view of the class due to the e-book, experiencing stress or struggling in a course where they had not bought the textbook, or not having an excuse to do the reading/work due to the e-book. Women were almost twice as likely to say they always buy all the books on their list and more than twice as likely to report that it had been harder or impossible to complete assigned work. Women were twice as likely to report renting textbooks, twice as likely to report checking with other students or RateMyProfessor, and five times as likely to report buying books they expect to be useful in their future classes/careers.

Meanwhile, those who identify as male were 1.5 times as likely to report having had difficulty following along in a course where they had not bought the textbook, nearly twice as likely to report only buying books that are required for completing assignments or assessments, and twice as likely to report searching online for free textbooks. Men were also five times as likely to report focusing more on course work due to the e-book and twice as likely to say that the provided e-book was a useful resource.

*RQ2. How did having e-book(s) provided change their impressions of Milner Library?*

A vast majority (85 percent) of participants reported having previously used Milner Library resources, including electronic resources like e-books and print resources like books. A chi-square test of independence was conducted between previous use of electronic resources and self-identified gender. Figure 5 shows a statistically significant association between prior use of electronic resources and gender,  $\chi^2(6) = 21.306$ ,  $p = .002$ .

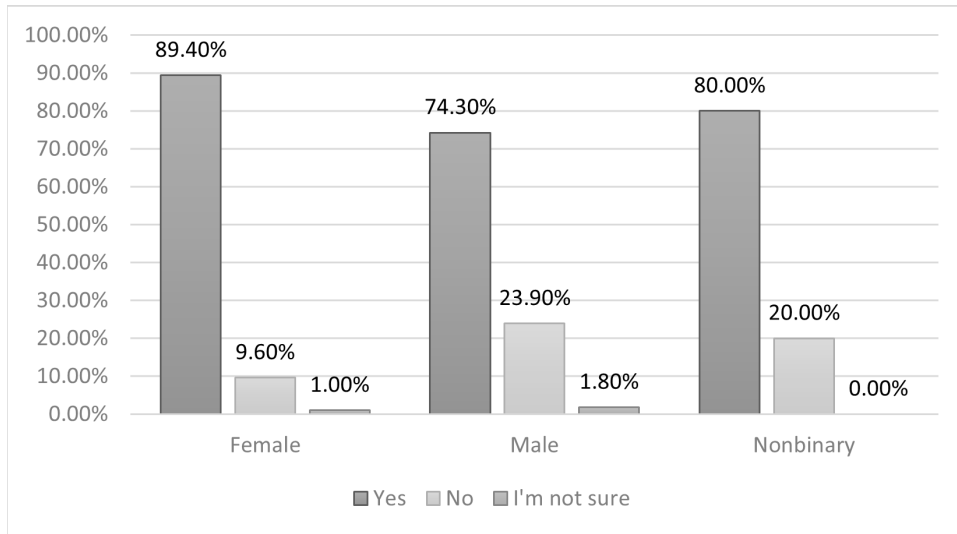


Figure 5. Previous Use of Library Resources by Gender

Questions also assessed how well Milner Library met their resource needs prior to this study. Of the 417 responses, most indicated that Milner typically has what they need (65 percent). About a third indicated the library sometimes has what they need (34 percent), and only 1 percent indicated the library never has what they need. These perspectives varied by self-identified race. Figure 6 presents a chi-square test of independence between students' previous opinions of resources and race, which shows a statistically significant association,  $\chi^2(10) = 24.741, p = .006$ .

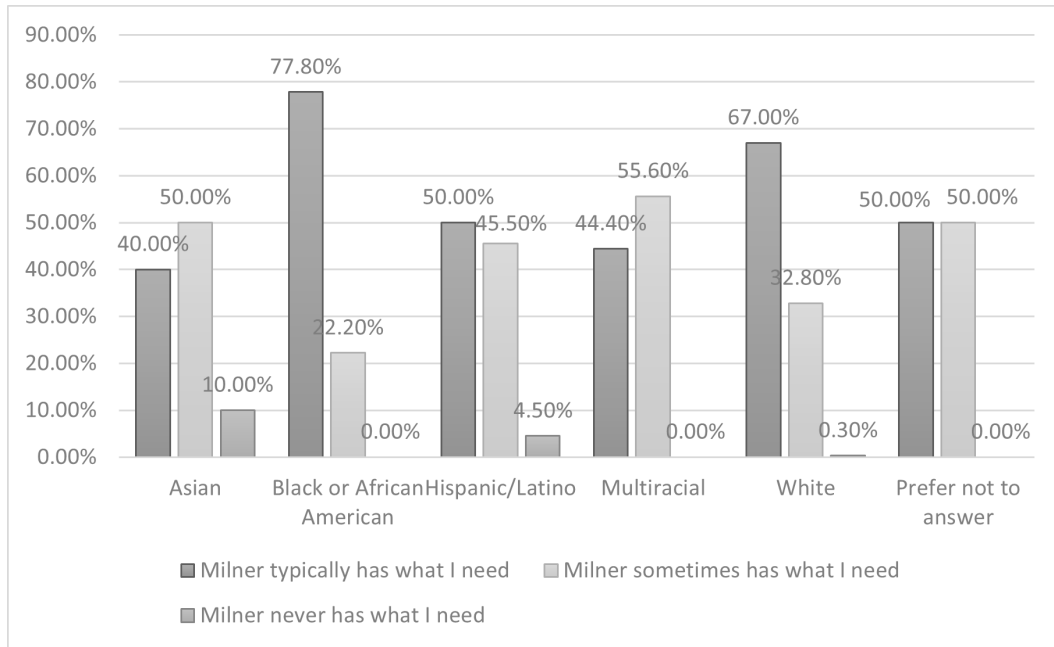


Figure 6. Previous Opinion of Resource Availability by Race

Students provided input how their opinion had changed after using a library-supplied e-book. Sixty-eight percent reported a positive change and 32 percent reported no change. Figure 7 presents the results of a chi-square test of independence between change of opinion and race. There was a statistically significant association between change of opinion and race,  $\chi^2(10) = 68.371, p < .001$ .

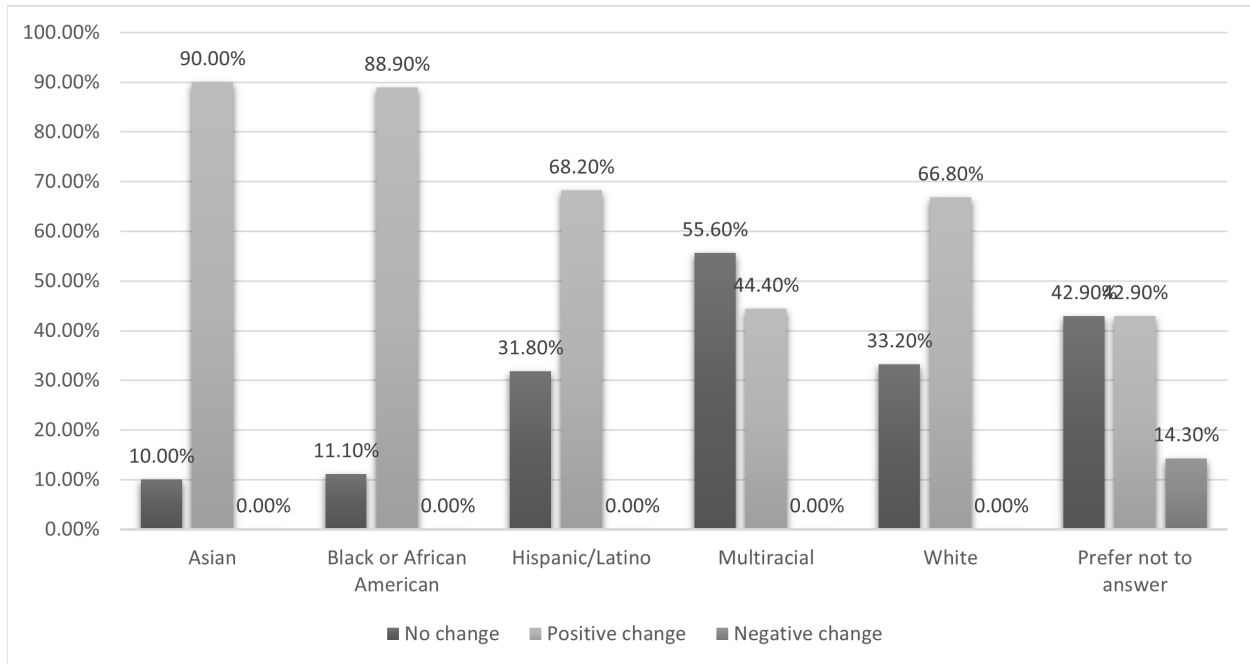


Figure 7. Change of Opinion after Using E-books by Race

Students indicated their preference between two, equally desirable sections with one using a digital textbook and the other a traditional textbook. Fifty-five percent indicated they would enroll in the digital textbook section, 27 percent had no preference, and 18 percent preferred traditional textbooks. Almost all participants indicated they would be very likely (62 percent) or somewhat likely (34 percent) to register for a future course that used a library-provided e-book. A chi-square test of independence was conducted between future course choice and race. Figure 8 shows a statistically significant association between future course choice and race,  $\chi^2(10) = 18.975, p = .041$ .



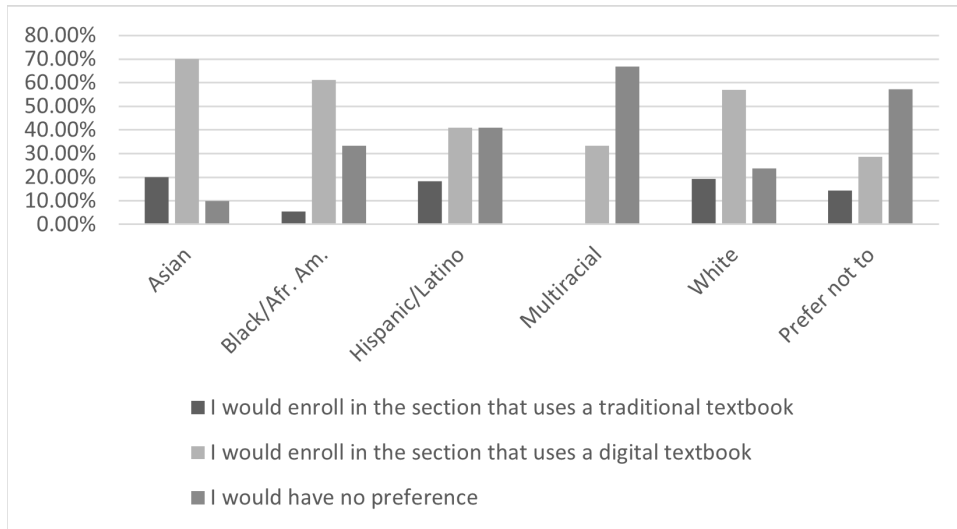


Figure 8 . Future Course Choice by Race

*RQ 3. How did having e-book(s) provided impact their academic success?*

Students shared their expected grade for the course in which e-book(s) were provided. The average overall response was 90 percent with a minimum value of 50 percent, a maximum of 100 percent, and a standard deviation of 6.867. Both a Kolmogorov-Smirnov and a Shapiro-Wilk test of normality returned p-values of < .001, which, combined with the histogram (figure 9), strongly suggest a non-normal distribution. Because the data is non-normal and the distributions by gender are not the same shape, the Kruskal-Wallis H Test was used to compare the mean ranks of each gender. The Kruskal-Wallis H test showed a statistically significant difference in the self-reported expected grade between the different genders,  $\chi^2(3) = 35.390$ ,  $p < .001$ , with a mean rank score of 91.25 for those who identify as women, 87.27 for those who identify as men, and 86.00 for those who identify as nonbinary (figure 10).

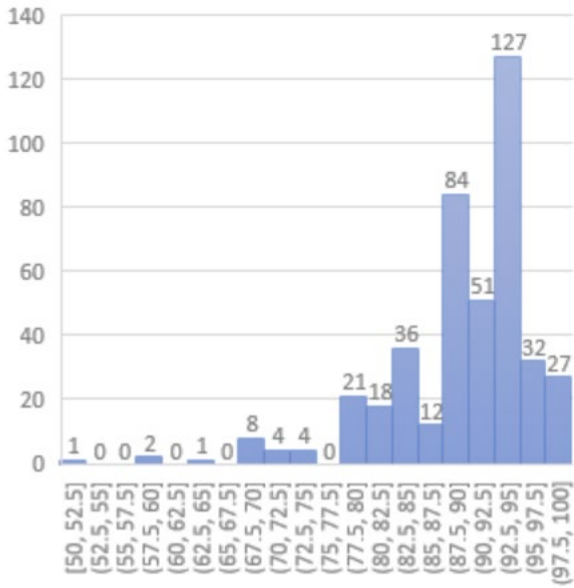


Figure 9. Expected Course Grade - Histogram

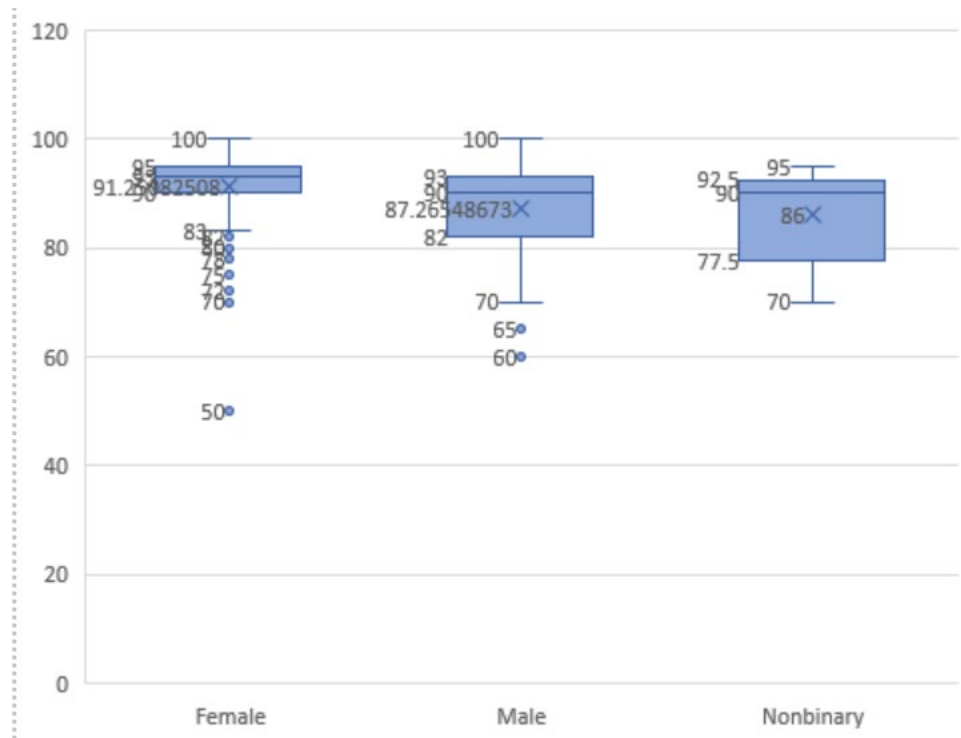


Figure 10. Expected Course Grade by Gender – Box Plot

To contextualize how having textbook(s) provided at no cost might impact academic success, the authors asked questions related to students' previous experiences taking classes

without having access to an assigned text. One student summed up their experience by offering: “In the cases where I’m unable to purchase the required texts, it leaves me playing catch up and attempting to understand what the main themes of each chapter / book are by the class discussions. It’s not the best outcome, but it’s the best I could do when it comes to super expensive textbooks.” The sentiment of attempting to catch up and keep up, but struggling to do so was common among participants.

Of the students who reported having taken a class without buying the textbook, about half noted it had affected them negatively in some way. Adverse effects included struggling to follow along or keep up with the class, difficulties navigating the class, challenges completing assigned work, and feeling less prepared. A smaller group reported receiving lower assessment scores or a lower overall grade. Still others experienced confusion, felt additional stress, or had lower confidence. One student reported having dropped the course and another described having to work more hours to buy the textbook partway through. Analysis reveals gendered elements to this experience, with 53 percent of women identifying respondents reporting a negative experience trying to take a class without a textbook compared to only 40 percent of male identifying respondents.

Considering the spring 2021 pilot program, almost 90 percent of participants expressed positive sentiments in response to the question of how having the library provided e-book(s) impacted student success in the course. No respondents indicated that the e-text had negatively affected their success. Of the seven percent who expressed a neutral sentiment, some indicated that the book was not necessary or that they chose not to use it, some responded that they rarely used the book, a few said they had already purchased the print book before finding out an e-book

was being provided, and one each indicated they had difficulty navigating e-books, experienced screen fatigue, chose to buy the book, prefer print, or would have bought the book anyway.

Of those who expressed a positive sentiment, over one-third noted accessibility. Other benefits included: cost savings, a better understanding of the material, ease of use, reduction of stress, searchability, facilitated completing assigned work, made studying easier, helped answer questions or find information more easily, not having to carry heavy books, was a useful resource, needed to complete assignments, time savings, helped them do better on assessments, did more reading, used the book more, or were likelier to use the book, more prepared, annotation and highlighting, easier to follow along or keep up with the class, more focused on school work, more organized, available on day one, necessary to succeed in the class, prefer e-books, did better on assigned work, did not have to work as many hours to pay for the books, “no excuse not to” do the readings or work, book helped them take better notes or made note taking easier, having a better start to the semester, more motivation, a better view of the class, it was equitable, and increased engagement. Several responses tied multiple elements together to explain the impact of the project: “Honestly, when I have to drop a few 100 on textbooks for a class, I walk in bitter. I’m already upset with the class. I don’t want to do anything. Tuition is expensive and I don’t like paying for unnecessary paper out of pocket. So, having a more positive view towards the class helped my motivation. Plus, financial stress makes it difficult to focus, so that was gotten rid of.”

The survey asked if students believe that access to the library provided e-book(s) impacted their grade in this course, and why or why not. Of the 421 participants who answered, eight expressed no opinion or uncertainty, 111 responses were neutral, indicating that the e-book had little or no influence on their grade, and 302 were positive (indicating the e-book had

positively influenced their grade). No responses indicated that the e-book had negatively affected their grade. Of the neutral responses, some stated the book was not necessary to succeed in the class, some shared that they rarely or did not use the e-book, a few indicated the student had already acquired the print book before finding out the e-book was provided or chose to purchase the print version or prefer print generally. Many responses underlined that stable access to assigned materials is essential to academic success: “Well I need the book in general to learn the content and succeed. It’s the added benefit of not having to pay for another book when we have enough to pay for to attend college in the first place. I think it also really impacts the students who can’t afford to purchase the books because how can they be successful without the book.”

Of the 302 positive responses, participants noted the following elements specifically: accessibility, gained a better understanding or learned more, needed for assignments, financial benefit, necessary to succeed in the course, did better on assessments, enhanced studying, easier to use than print, e-book helped answer questions or find information easily, easier to complete assigned work, useful resource, ease of searching, easier to follow along or keep up with the class, used the book often, would not have bought the book, did better on assigned work, experienced less stress or worry, took better notes or it was easier to take notes, did more reading or used the book more, felt more prepared, increased motivation, appreciated the time savings, focused more on school, was more organized, preferred e-books, glad they did not have to carry heavy books, had no excuse not to do the readings, appreciated the e-book tools, had day-one access, increased their work ethic or engagement, enjoyed a better start to the semester or better view of the class, and, importantly, was more more equitable. Students offered strong endorsements of the project’s support for equity: “Having this text free to use has been an

enriching and fulfilling experience. Eliminating payment walls is a massive stride toward an anti-racist movement and bridging the academic gap.”

## **Discussion**

*RQ1. How did students perceive the experience of having access to and using library-licensed e-book(s)?*

Students overwhelmingly indicated that the convenience and ease of access to provided e-books were beneficial. It makes sense that the security of having an assigned text provided at no additional cost which can be accessed throughout the semester from any device would provide peace of mind. This suggestion is bolstered by the considerable number of students who indicated that the pilot reduced the anxiety they typically feel related to acquiring or sourcing texts. The financial benefit mentioned by many students reiterates that finding the money to purchase assigned texts is a hardship for students. For some students, purchasing texts means working more hours—several participants said this explicitly—these hours are then lost to studying and other forms of engagement that benefit student success. Because students felt the provided e-books saved them time, they were able to invest that time in ways more meaningful to them.

Some students noted they did more reading and used the e-book more because it was provided, and several felt more prepared. The digital tools built into e-books—especially the capacity to search within the text, but also text annotation and highlighting functions—also enhanced students’ experiences. Students reported only minor challenges in using the provided e-books and any challenges in use or access did not diminish the overall positive experience with the e-books.

*RQ2. How did having e-book(s) provided change their impressions of Milner Library?*

The majority of participants—68 percent—noted a positive change in perception of Milner Library after participating in this pilot project and using library-provided e-books. This highlights that licensing even one of multiple assigned texts in a semester holds the opportunity to improve students' impressions of the academic library. Importantly, by providing an assigned text, students were exposed to other resources; some students indicated that they discovered other useful resources when accessing their assigned text through the library's databases. The degree to which students perceive the library to be useful to them has implications for their academic success and sense of belonging at the University. By investing a relatively small amount in licensing assigned texts and soliciting student input, Milner Library conveyed that librarians are eager to be part of a solution to an issue that is the source of anxiety for many students.

*RQ3. How did having e-book(s) provided impact students' academic success?*

Although the library provided e-books were overwhelmingly positively received by both faculty members and students in this pilot, faculty members were not convinced that increased student success could be attributed to the provided e-books.<sup>18</sup> Student participants in this study, however, did make this connection; 372 of 414 students expressed positive sentiments about the role of the provided e-text in their academic success. The articulated reasons for positive sentiment provide insight into how having the text provided enhanced student success. Many students felt they gained a better understanding of the material or learned more, that the e-book made completing assignments and studying easier, and that it assisted in answering questions or finding information. The provided e-books, then, were useful and engaging tools the

students had at their disposal and facilitated their participation within the learning environment of their courses.

Some of the students' positive sentiments may seem trivial, such as not needing to carry heavy books, or hard to prove, such as attributing to the e-book a better view of the class. The interactions of several factors—material and emotional—shape learning and engagement. The variety of concrete ways in which the e-books helped students, from having access on day one, making it easier to follow along, focus on their school work, stay organized, take better notes, and perform better on assignments coexist with more affective elements, from taking away excuses, improving motivation, getting the semester off to a better start, or making the experience more engaging and equitable. Because these students had a material need met by the library-provided e-books, they were able to engage more equitably and with less anxiety. The results indicate students were able to focus on participating and learning, which is what they enrolled to do.

## **Conclusion**

This paper reports data from a survey conducted with undergraduate student participants (n=423) in a library pilot project to license e-book copies of required course textbooks. The findings suggest that providing assigned materials as e-books not only addresses equity issues in the classroom but also contributes to students' engagement as learners and their academic success within courses. The research contributes to the literature by exploring connections between textbook affordability and student success, amplifying student perspectives on textbook affordability, and outlining one example of a library strategy that directly benefits student learning and engagement.



Collecting this information from students has informed the authors' next steps. The authors are in the midst of their fifth consecutive semester of the project and have revised workflows in accordance with changes in funding sources and amounts as well as personnel within and outside the library.<sup>19</sup> The student responses aligned with studies conducted at ISU and elsewhere—but collecting the data has been essential to conveying the value of textbook affordability initiatives to University administrators and has led to an increasing amount of funding over the project's five semesters. Collecting the data has also demonstrated that librarians throughout the library—whether in a technical services or public services unit—care deeply about the academic success of ISU students and are working within their functional roles and affordances to help alleviate the burden of costly textbooks.

## **Appendix A. Student Survey Instrument**

Had you previously used Milner Library resources (e-books/articles/books/etc.)?

What did you like about using library e-book(s)? (Choose all that apply)

– Other, please explain:

What challenges did you encounter in using the e-book(s)? (Choose all that apply)

- Other, please explain:

What percentage of your assigned textbooks do you typically purchase?

How do you decide which assigned texts to purchase?

How has not purchasing the required text(s) impacted your success in a course?

How did having this(these) e-book(s) provided for you impact your success in this course?

What grade do you expect to receive in this course?

Do you believe that access to the e-book(s) has impacted your grade in this course?

Why or why not?

If you had previously used Milner Library resources, what was your general opinion on their availability?

Now that you've used a Milner Library e-book for your class, how has this opinion changed?

How likely are you to register for a future course that uses a library-provided online textbook like the one used in this course?

Imagine a future course you are required to take. If two different sections of this course are offered by the same instructor during equally desirable time slots, but one section uses digital textbooks and the other uses traditional published textbooks, which section would you prefer to enroll in?

What is your major (if multiple, list both)?

What year are you?

Other: - Text

Do you identify as (choose all that apply):

What gender do you identify as?

Please enter the course number(s) for the class(es) in which you have a library-provided e-book  
(for example, AGR 203, BUS 100, COM 101)

Is this a required course for your degree?

Is this course in your major program?

Approximately how much did you spend on other textbooks for this course?

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<sup>2</sup> Nancy Maron, Rebecca Kennison, Paul Bracke, Nathan Hall, Isaac Gilman, Kara Malenfant, Charlotte Roh, and Yasmeen Shorish. *Open and Equitable Scholarly Communication: Creating a More Inclusive Future* (Chicago: Association of College & Research Libraries, 2019), 17, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/scholcom/111/>.

<sup>3</sup> Rachel E. Scott, Mallory Jallas, Julie A. Murphy, Rachel Park, and Anne Shelley, "Assessing the Value of Course-Assigned E-Books," *Collection Management* 47, no. 4 (2022): 253–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01462679.2022.2068465>; Rachel E. Scott, Mallory Jallas, Julie A. Murphy, Rachel Park, and Anne Shelley, "Exploring Faculty Perspectives on Text Selection and Textbook Affordability," *College & Research Libraries* 84, no. 2 (2023): 180–202, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.84.2.180>.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Christie, John H. Pollitz, and Cheryl Middleton, "Student Strategies for Coping with Textbook Costs and the Role of Library Course Reserves," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 9, no. 4 (2009): 491–510; Molly Murphy, "Textbooks on Reserve: A Case Study" *Journal of Access Services* 10, no. 3 (2013): 145–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15367967.2013.795429>.

<sup>5</sup> Tomalee Doan, "Why Not OER?" *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 17, no. 4 (2017): 665–9. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2017.0039>; Dr. Braddlee and Amy VanScoy, "Bridging the Chasm: Faculty Support Roles for Academic Librarians in the Adoption of Open Educational Resources," *College & Research Libraries* 80, no. 4 (2019): 426–49. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.80.4.426>.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Shelley and Rachel E. Scott, "Textbook Affordability Initiatives and Open Educational Resources: Complementary or Competing Approaches to a Persistent Problem?" 2022 NASIG Proceedings.

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<sup>7</sup> Jason Boczar and Laura Pascual, “E-books for the Classroom and Open Access Textbooks: Two Ways to Help Students Save Money on Textbooks,” *The Serials Librarian*, 72, nos. 1–4 (2017): 95–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0361526X.2017.1309830>.

<sup>8</sup> Lily Todorinova and Zara Wilkinson, “Closing the Loop: Students, Academic Libraries, and Textbook Affordability,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 45, no. 3 (2019): 268–77. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2019.03.010>.

<sup>9</sup> Florida Virtual Campus, *2022 Florida Student Textbook & Course Materials Survey*. Tallahassee, FL, 2023. <https://dlss.flvc.org/colleges-and-universities/research/textbooks>.

<sup>10</sup> John Hilton III, T. J. Bliss, T. Jared Robinson, and David A. Wiley, “An OER COUP: College teacher and Student Perceptions of Open Educational Resources,” *Journal of Interactive Media in Education* (2013), <https://jime.open.ac.uk/articles/10.5334/2013-04/>.

<sup>11</sup> Shawna Brandle, Stacy Katz, Anne Hays, Amy Beth, Cailean Cooney, Jacqueline DiSanto, Linda Miles, and Abigail Morrison, “But What Do the Students Think: Results of the CUNY Cross-Campus Zero-Textbook Cost Student Survey,” *Open Praxis* 11, no. 1 (2019): 85–101, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.11.1.932>.

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<sup>16</sup> Scott, Jallas, Murphy, Park, and Shelley, “Assessing the Value of Course-Assigned E-Books.”

<sup>17</sup> Scott, Jallas, Murphy, Park, and Shelley, “Exploring Faculty Perspectives on Text Selection and Textbook Affordability.”

<sup>18</sup> Scott, Jallas, Murphy, Park, and Shelley, “Exploring Faculty Perspectives on Text Selection and Textbook Affordability.” A recent study reported that instructors rated student learning slightly higher after adopting affordable materials: Shanna Smith Jaggars, Kaitly Prieto, Marcos D. Rivera, and Amanda L. Folk, “Using Affordable Course Materials: Instructors’ Motivations, Approaches, and Outcomes,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 22, no. 2 (2022): 305–34. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2022.0019>.

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