Student Spending Declines

Q1) Are students spending more on college course materials than ever before?

No, quite the opposite – recent data has shown that average student spending on course materials has steadily declined over the past decade:

- **Student Watch**: a recent survey found a drop of 45% in student spending on course materials over the past decade, estimating that the average student spend for the 2023-2024 academic year was $342. The Student Watch findings are the result of a survey involving more than 16,000 students across 36 institutions.
- **Student Monitor**: another recent report from this independent researcher also indicates a 45% decline in student spending on course materials over the past ten years, estimating average spending at $332. The Student Monitor findings are the result of comprehensive, one-on-one, on campus interviews conducted among four-year, full-time undergraduates attending 100 colleges and universities.

The two organizations have different methodologies, which can result in slightly different figures, although their findings are quite similar. What they do agree on is the overall trend of student spending on course materials declining over time.

Q2) According to The College Board, course materials will cost between $1,250 - $1,470 for the 2023-2024 academic year. That doesn’t match the numbers from Student Watch and Student Monitor. Why?

Actually, the College Board’s most recent report, [Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2023](#), states that average student spending on course materials during the 2022-23 year is just $310 (pg. 11 of the report). The report also includes a link to a video highlighting the importance of the Student Monitor and Student Watch reports that indicate a multi-year decline in student spending.

The larger number, which has been wildly misconstrued, is an estimate compiled by the College Board which includes more than just course materials such as textbooks and homework platforms commonly known as “courseware,” but also school supplies, and higher cost items such as laptops, hardware and software, and lab kits, among other items. The disaggregated number for course material costs is $310.

Q3) Why is student spending on course materials declining?

A large driver of the decline in student spending is the transition to digital materials, which are provided via affordable access programs. When it comes to acquiring course materials, students have more choice – and more affordable alternatives – than ever, including print rental and lower cost loose-leaf versions, e-books, digital courseware and open educational resources (OER). In
addition to these various formats, in the last decade institutions also began to implement affordable access programs like Inclusive Access and Equitable Access, which further reduce course material costs and ensure access for students on the first day of class. The statistics make it clear that students are taking full advantage of the new, cost-effective options that publishers have made available, which has led to a significant decline in student spending.

**Affordable Access**

**Q4) What are affordable access programs like Inclusive and Equitable Access?**

Affordable access programs are course material delivery models that helps institutions of higher education provide students with access to course materials on the first day of class, at a discounted price. Check out AAP’s video on the Inclusive Access model [here](#).

**Q5) What are the benefits of affordable access programs?**

Models like Inclusive or Equitable Access offer the following benefits to students:

- Accessible, interactive and personalized digital content and platforms from educational publishers that are significantly discounted from retail.
- First-day access to required course materials for all students enrolled in the program, which [research](#) has shown to increase student success and course completion.
- Because institutions are able to post charges for course materials on student’s accounts alongside tuition and fees, students are conveniently able to use their financial aid to pay for the materials and do not have to pay out of pocket.
- Institutions make available an opt-out for students who wish to obtain their course materials another way.

**Q6) How have students reacted to affordable access programs like Inclusive Access?**

Various studies show students to be very satisfied with these programs. In fact, Student Watch data shows that the top two reasons students like Inclusive Access programs were convenience, and that they receive all their required materials on the first day of class, with affordability being the 4th most cited benefit. And Student Monitor found that among students that participated in their school’s Inclusive Access program, 81% said Inclusive Access provided a better value for the cost of their tuition.

Many students find significant benefit in having their required course materials billed via their student account alongside tuition and fees, so their financial aid and/or scholarships can automatically be applied. Through these programs, students can immediately obtain access to their materials on or before the first day of class, providing them the best chance for success. Without these programs, many students have reported having to wait until their financial aid checks are dispersed in order to be able to purchase their materials, which in some cases can take weeks into the start of the semester.
Q7) How do students pay for their course materials in affordable access programs?

The method of payment can vary, but the ability to bundle payment with tuition and fees provides for flexibility for students. The federal regulations guiding affordable access programs like Inclusive and Equitable Access, including Title IV of the Higher Education Act, state that an institution may include the costs of books and supplies as part of tuition and fees if the “institution has an arrangement with a book publisher or other entity that enables it to make those books or supplies available to students below competitive market rates.” This allows students to access their financial aid or scholarships easily to pay for their materials rather than waiting possibly weeks into the semester when their financial aid is dispersed to purchase. Those who are not utilizing loans or scholarships can pay for their materials alongside their tuition and fees.

Q8) With affordable access programs like Inclusive Access, do course material providers have direct access to students’ wallets?

Absolutely not. All financial transactions are between the student and the institution.

Q9) How many campuses are making a type of affordable access program available to their students?

Students on more than 1,500 campuses throughout the United States participate in an affordable access program like Inclusive or Equitable Access.

Q10) Are course materials provided through affordable access programs like Inclusive Access really more affordable than purchasing through the open market?

Yes. In order for a school to offer an affordable access program like Inclusive or Equitable Access, they are required by law to offer the course materials below market rates. Institutions are able to extend discounts to students because they have the ability, through these programs, to leverage volume-based purchasing. The savings associated with affordable access programs can be significant, with one university citing discounts of 50 – 80% for participating students.

Other success stories include:

University of Iowa, Minneapolis College, College of Wooster, University of Arizona, Indiana University, University of California Davis, Texas A&M, University of Missouri, Austin Peay State University (page 9), Copiah Lincoln Community College, California State University San Bernadino

Q11) What role has the U.S. Department of Education played in regulating affordable access programs like Inclusive Access?

In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education conducted an extensive, public rule-making process ultimately issuing regulations permitting institutions of higher learning to charge students for books and supplies as part of tuition and fees as long as the materials are delivered by the 7th day of class, they are below competitive market rates, and the institutions provide students the ability to opt out.
Q12) Are the course materials made available through affordable access programs competitive with other options?

Yes. The course materials provided through affordable access programs are the exact materials students would find on the open market.

Affordable access programs do not change what materials faculty require for their course, only the distribution. These programs traditionally offer digital content, which students access directly through their institution’s learning management system alongside their course information. Typically, what is delivered in affordable access programs is a “perpetual” or lifetime subscription. However, if a faculty member or student decides they want print in lieu of digital or in addition to, print is provided through the program.

Q13) Can students opt out of affordable access programs like Inclusive Access and Equitable Access?

Yes. Institutions are responsible for providing a process for students to opt out who don’t want to participate in affordable access programs.

If students choose not to participate in these programs, they can simply opt out and either purchase the materials on their own, either directly through the publisher, another online provider or at the physical bookstore in the format they prefer. They can also borrow from a friend, or simply forgo obtaining their required course materials. However, this is not recommended as research shows that student outcomes are better when they have high quality, engaging, learning resources.

Note: The federal rulemaking governing these programs requires that the course material providers make books or supplies available “below competitive market rates,” so students who purchase materials in other ways may end up paying more.

How the opt-out policy is communicated is determined by the institution. Some examples of opt-out processes include:

   Athens State University, Auburn University, University of Alabama

Q14) What is the time frame for students to opt out of affordable access programs like Inclusive Access and Equitable Access?

The opt-out timeframe is determined by the institution, and it is generally in line with the institution’s designated add-drop period (approximately 10-14 days).

See responses linked in Q13 for examples of individual institution opt-out processes.

Q15) If these course materials are sold to students at a lower price through affordable access programs like Inclusive Access, how do course material providers profit?

Based on early pilots of affordable access programs, course material providers expect that most students will participate in the offered program. Therefore, institutions are able to negotiate with content providers and 3rd party retailers for discounts based on large volume sales. These
discounts are then passed on to the students, resulting in substantial savings compared to purchasing through traditional methods.

Q16) Do institutions have to meet quotas to get the discounts for materials provided through affordable access programs?

To offer discounts based on economies of scale, institutions, course material providers, and 3rd party retailers come to individual agreements on what constitutes bulk purchasing for their student body. In most cases contracts terms are negotiated by each state, system or institution individually.

Q17) Can’t course material providers eventually raise prices for these materials?

Federal regulations require that an institution that has an arrangement with “a book publisher or other entity” must make books or supplies available “below competitive market rates.” As a result, student spending on course materials has been declining over the past decade.

Q18) Do these programs eliminate academic freedom for faculty?

Not at all. Affordable access programs are designed to be flexible and can include any of the course materials faculty would typically select to require for their students. Additionally, Inclusive Access programs can be flexibly implemented on a section, course, or department level.

Q19) What about Open Education Resources (OER)? Aren’t they a better option to address course material affordability?

Some Open Educational Resources (OER) are useful, but many that are free or low cost can be limited in scope. Some are simply written content delivered via a flat PDF file on a website, which may or may not meet standards for accessibility, student data privacy, or security. Most do not include robust learning exercises with animations, video, and/or software simulations that engage students and prepare them for their field of study.

OER materials typically do not include instructor support materials such as assessments or presentation files. And while many OER are free or low-cost for students, they require significant investments for development and upkeep from institutions.

Publishers of professionally produced course materials, on the other hand, invest heavily in order to ensure the highest levels of pedagogy. Publishers fund development by subject matter experts, insist on rigorous editorial processes, provide technical support for students and faculty, and ensure quality over the long haul.