



AFFORDABLE ACCESS PROGRAMS

Myth vs. Fact

Affordable access programs, like Inclusive Access (IA) or Equitable Access (EA), are innovative course material delivery models that help institutions of higher education provide students with access to course materials on the first day of class, at a discounted price. These models continue to gain popularity, with more than 1,500 campuses (and growing) making affordable access programs available to their students to help increase student success and decrease costs.

Below are some easily dispelled myths about these programs.

MYTH 1

Students in many cases pay more for their course materials through affordable access programs like Inclusive and Equitable Access.

FACT:

Just the opposite. Affordable access programs have helped drive a dramatic 40 to 54% decrease in student spending on course materials over the past decade. In fact, according to the [College Board's most recent report](#), average student spending for course materials is just \$340 a year (page 11 of the report), making the category a rare bright spot in higher education affordability.

The rules that govern these programs were created in 2015, when the US Department of Education allowed institutions to charge books and supplies as part of tuition and fees, as long as materials are available by the 7th day of class, **are offered below competitive market rates**, and students are provided the option to opt out. These regulations mean institutions can negotiate bulk discounts, ultimately providing students with convenient, affordable options for acquiring their required course materials on the first day of class, and at a significantly discounted price ([see here](#) for Inclusive Access success stories.)

MYTH 2

Student spending on textbooks and course materials is at an all-time high and continues to grow.

FACT:

No, in fact, according to the [College Board](#), students spend just \$340 a year on course materials. More recent data also shows that average student spending on course materials has steadily declined over the past decade:

- **Student Watch:** a recent survey found a drop of 40% in student spending on course materials over the past ten years, averaging \$341 for the 2024-2025 academic year. The Student Watch findings are the result of a survey involving more than 12,000 students across 29 institutions.
- **Student Monitor:** another recent report indicates a 54% decline in student spending on course materials over the past ten years, averaging \$318 for the 2024-2025 academic year. The Student Monitor findings are the result of comprehensive, one-on-one campus interviews conducted among 12,000 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 has declined over the last decade, allowing more students access to high-quality materials.

MYTH 3

Under affordable access programs like Inclusive Access, First Day or other university branded programs, the ability for students to opt out is not available, hidden, confusing, or students are billed without being notified.

FACT:

The rules that govern affordable access programs require colleges to provide students with the ability to opt out from these programs before charges are posted to student accounts. The opt-out policy and communication are determined by the institution, and the timeframe is generally in line with the institution's designated add-drop period (approximately 10-14 days). Institutions communicate about these charges in numerous ways (via email, the institution or affiliated bookstore's website, the course catalog, etc.).

Here is an example of [Auburn University's](#) opt-out process for their Affordable Access program.

Here is an example of price disclosure and transparency of opt-out process from [UC Davis's](#) Equitable Access program.

MYTH 4

Course materials that are part of affordable access programs like Inclusive Access are frequently more expensive than textbooks found on the open market.

FACT:

The truth is that affordable access programs have driven a 54% decline in student spending on course materials, which is backed by multiple independent research groups including Student Monitor and Student Watch. The average annual spend for college students on course materials is only \$340, according to the [College Board](#).

Affordable access programs have driven this significant decline in spending because regulations require that course materials offered in these programs are below competitive market rates. The discounts to students are significant, with [one university](#) citing reductions in price of 50–80% for participating students ([see here](#) for more examples).

In some limited cases, students may find an individual course material available at the same price or lower on the open market, but these individual moments do not meet the institution's needs across an entire class or the required length of access. This is why institutions offer all students the ability to opt out of their affordable access program if they decide they want to purchase their course materials in a different manner.

MYTH 5

Open Educational Resources are free and a better solution to course material affordability.

FACT:

Some Open Education 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 software 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.

MYTH 6

Affordable access programs like Inclusive and Equitable Access constrict faculty's academic freedom.

FACT:

On the contrary, affordable access programs provide faculty with a myriad of effective models to provide students with high quality materials that can help them succeed.

These high-quality materials have been proven to increase student success and engagement in the classroom, with particularly positive outcomes for underserved groups. [Research](#) has found that these programs have increased success rates up to 13% for Black students and have improved completion rates by up to 22% for some student groups.

Additionally, Inclusive Access programs can be flexibly implemented on a section, course, or department level.

MYTH 7

Internet/broadband access is often a hidden cost of affordable access programs.

FACT:

That's simply not true. Institutions do not charge students for internet/broadband access as part of fees for affordable access programs. Charges for internet and technology are part of regular administration fees and are completely separate from these programs.