

What students are talking about when they talk about textbook prices

All quotes come from a recording of a panel of five Hollins students, conducted at an open educational resources event Nov. 11 in the Wyndham Robertson Library.

Textbook costs impact lives.

“I spent almost \$400 this semester on textbooks. And it wasn’t my money, because I couldn’t afford it. **So I had to ask my parents for the money, and they couldn’t pay our house bill the next month, because of how much they spent on my textbooks.**”

“I spent around \$350, all of that had to go to a credit card in my name, because I don’t have the resources to get money from parents. So that was all on a credit card I’m still paying, and **I’m still paying for books from last year on the same credit card.**”

Textbook costs drive students into making sub-optimal educational choices.

“Last semester, I had to take a chem course, a biology course, and two other courses I needed to take me up to the credit load I needed to be a full-time student. It came down to choosing between Intro to Business and there was another course. I remember looking for the textbooks I’d need for each course, and thinking, OK, I’m not going to do this course, **I’m going to go with Intro to Business because it’s much cheaper.**”

“When I’m factoring in what will work as a feasible schedule that won’t kill me, I start looking at textbook prices to make sure that won’t kill me either. So there have been times, like a foreign language class, [those] books seemed to be really expensive, I’m putting that off until I have some more savings or more room on my credit card. **So I’m a sophomore who hasn’t taking any foreign language yet, because I can’t afford the book.**”

“**I’ve had to put off taking some of my political science classes because I can’t afford the textbooks.** And a lot of time, they’re not on the website when you need to buy them, or over the summer, when I’m looking to see how much I need to save for them, but they’re not there, so you can’t.”

The inability to purchase a textbook can damage student work and learning.

“In my case, when I didn’t have a textbook, I kind of like became friends with people in my class, and would rotate between 5 and 6 people. “Um, so when you’re done with your book...” **Sometimes, I’d have an assignment due, and they’d text me at like 10:00, and say, “oh, do you still need my book?” 10:00 the night before it’s due. And like, that’s when you’re going to go get the book, and you’re going to stay up late doing the assignment,** but if you have to have the book to get the assignment done, then you’ve got to do what you’ve got to do, you’ve got to stay late.”

“I found I take a lot of similar courses, especially in psychology, I’ve taken cognition, intelligence, human memory. They all have a lot of the same underlying psychologists we’re talking about. **So I’ll use a book from my intelligence class, when I have to look up stuff for cognition, which right now I don’t have the book for.** We’ll talk about Piaget, and there will be a chapter on Piaget in the book. I’ll also use my notes a lot, I’ll also just go talk to the professor if I have questions, and I’ll take more notes on what they tell me in our discussions, if I feel I don’t have a good depth of knowledge on a topic. It’s working real well this semester, but last year it didn’t go as well. I still did fine, but I could have done better.”

“I think I spent about \$200 on textbooks, which is just half that’s for half of the textbooks that I need, because me and my roommate do the same subjects, we’re both majoring in the same thing. **Because it’s so expensive to get textbooks, we say, you buy half of them, and I’ll buy half of them. And I didn’t even buy them, they were rented textbooks.**”

Even cheaper books can add up for students. Frustration mounts when a textbook isn’t used.

When you’re taking 3 English classes, that really piles up quickly. I’ve also run into a thing where I buy 5 books for a class and we read 3 of them. **They’re cheaper, but they do pile up, and if you don’t use all of them, then it’s just money wasted.** One class, a book was required, and we either ran out of time or she just decided not to use it, and didn’t tell any of us.”

Students may not talk to their professors about financial difficulties.

“As a student coming from a very poor area, going to school at an expensive institution like Hollins, there is a lot of, **there’s like humiliation at having to go to your professor and being like, “I can’t afford this, my mom and dad can’t afford this, my grandparents can’t help, there’s nothing I can do.”** There’s some form of humiliation with that.”

Students understand what’s at stake.

“Anytime there’s tension between student and professor, that compromises the learning environment. **If I’m a disgruntled student because of textbook prices, and you’re a disgruntled professor because no one is buying your textbook, what kind of environment does that create? What kind of trust does that create?”**