

8-2023

Report on ODU Findings from the Virginia Course Materials Survey Fall 2021

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Vaughan, Karen, "Report on ODU Findings from the Virginia Course Materials Survey Fall 2021" (2023). *Libraries Reports and Documents*. 19.
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Report on ODU Findings from the Virginia Course Materials Survey Fall 2021

In 2016, the Code of Virginia § 23.1-1038 required that the “governing board of each public institution of higher education shall implement policies, procedures, and guidelines that encourage efforts to minimize the cost of textbooks for students while maintaining the quality of education and academic freedom (E).” In 2018, another requirement was added that the governing board “shall implement guidelines for the adoption and use of low-cost and no-cost open educational resources in courses offered at such institution. Such guidelines may include provisions for low-cost commercially published materials (F).”

From October 1-December 31, 2021, the Virtual Library of Virginia (VIVA) conducted a survey of students at Virginia colleges and universities. More than 5,600 valid student responses from 41 institutions were received, reflecting an overall response rate of 10%. The largest response (58.5%) was from doctoral institutions, with private, two-year, and four-year institutions responding at 12-14%. A random sample of ODU students produced 287 responses (see Appendix A for ODU demographics).

The survey aimed to answer these questions:

- ✓ What is the impact of course material costs on educational equity among Virginia students?
- ✓ What course content materials do students find to be most beneficial to their learning?

It also served to update and validate surveys conducted by other states and regions in the past, including a survey of ODU students in 2017. The full survey instrument and results are available on the VIVA Website: <https://vivalib.org/va/open/survey>

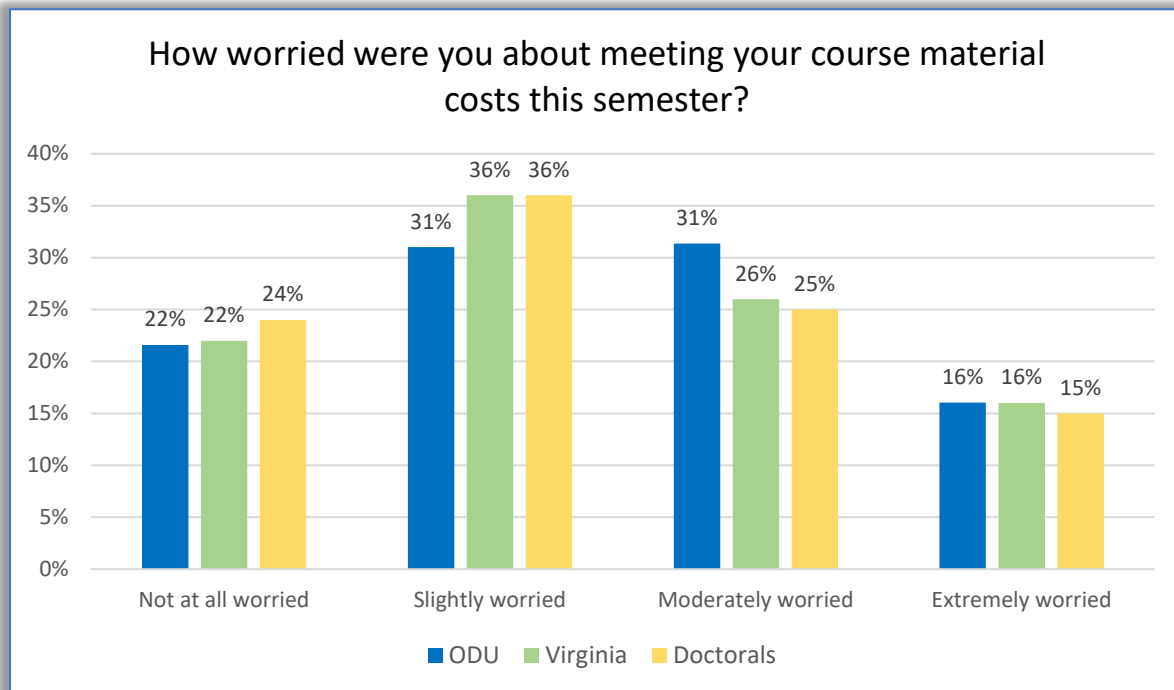
KEY FINDINGS

1. ODU students are slightly more worried about meeting their course material costs than other Virginia students.
2. Course material costs are a major factor for ODU students in the large academic decisions of major/minor/institution selection.
3. Course material costs affect ODU students' academic performance (progress, opportunity, success) at a higher rate than other VA students.
4. ODU students find alternatives to purchasing costly course materials.
5. If cost were not an issue, ODU students prefer print course materials (if they had to make a choice).
6. ODU students also prefer materials that are easy to access, available beyond the course, affordable, actively used throughout the course, and essential to success in the course.

This report was compiled by Karen Vaughan, Head of the Scholarly Communication & Publishing Department at Old Dominion University Libraries. It is based on data and reporting provided by the Virtual Library of Virginia.

1. ODU students are slightly more worried about meeting their course material costs than other Virginia students.

Similar to other Virginia respondents, 78% of ODU respondents had some level of worry, with 16% of our students “extremely worried.” A greater percent of ODU students, however, was more “moderately worried” than other VA students overall and those at VA doctoral institutions (5% and 6% respectively).

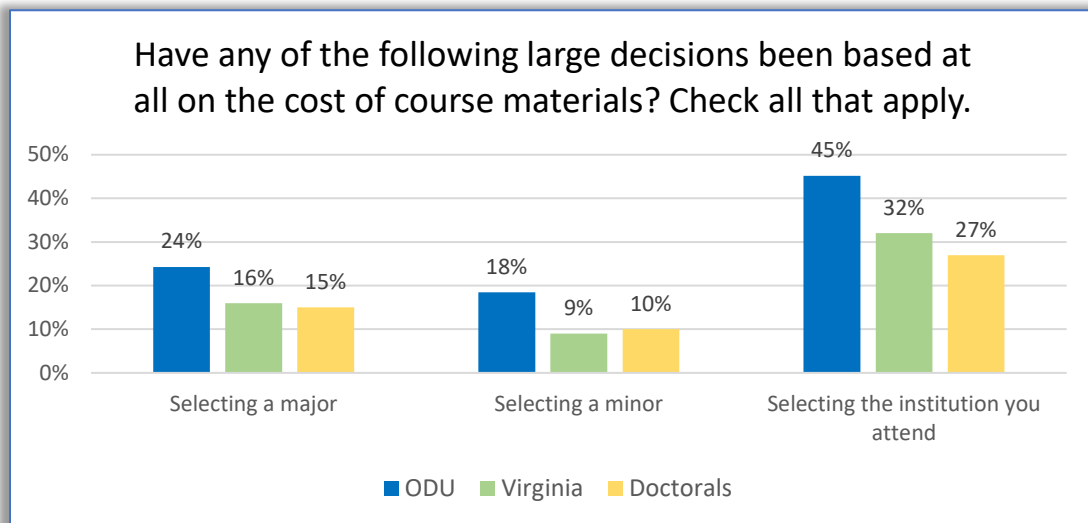


2. Course material costs are a major factor for ODU students in the large academic decisions of major/minor/institution selection.

While 32% of Virginia responses and only 27% of doctoral school responses indicated that course material costs were a factor in deciding which institution to select, 45% of ODU students felt this way. Regarding selection of majors and minors, 8-9% more ODU students selected majors and minors based, at least in part, on course material costs. ODU students appear to be more affected than their counterparts.

12% of ODU students selected “Other” with comments including:

- *Had to arrange funding for extra expenses.*
- *Had to select the order of my classes - Engineering labs are expensive on top of a \$90 book.*
- *Took medical school prerequisites at community college rather than ODU.*
- *Usually the cost of materials is not presented upfront and transparently. We were surprised to find out about the textbook subscription costs.*



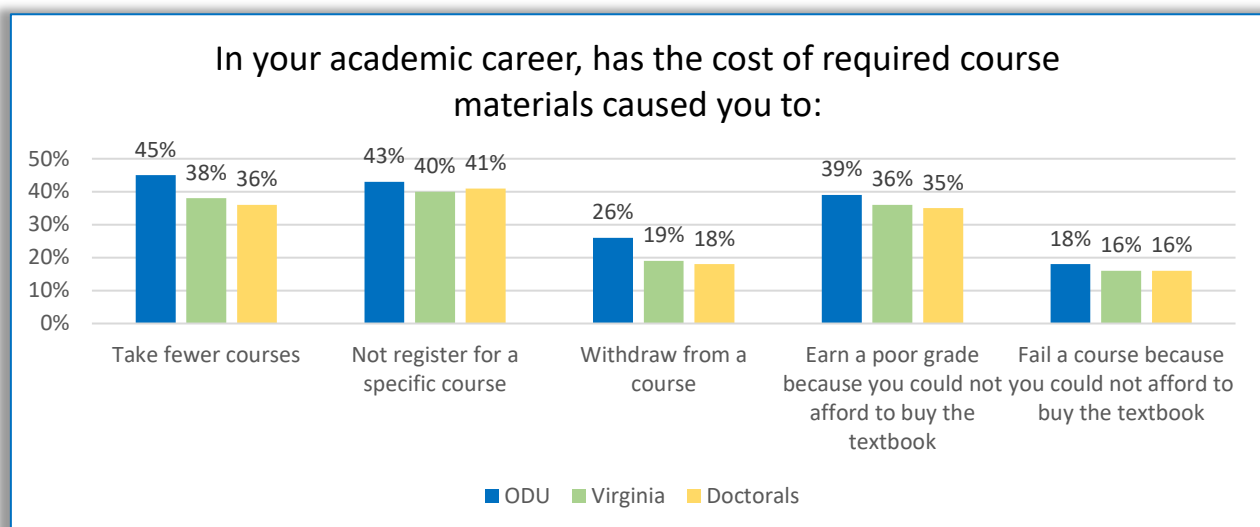
Several comments to other questions indicated students also choose courses based on course material costs:

- *Prior to registering for a class, I will check the required material. If the cost is excessive, I will enroll in a different class.*
- *I'd say I tried to choose professors who allowed us to get older editions of the required books. I chose not to take classes based upon the cost of those materials.*
- *Expensive course material like textbooks and access codes is one of the most important things I look for when avoiding a course. Having to pay an extra \$200 per course at times per semester can get overwhelming fast, especially if I am working part time rather than full time while in school.*
- *I would love to take 3-4 courses at a time but due to the cost of textbooks and the technology fee, I have to scale back on which classes I can take.*
- *Almost all textbooks include a platform that the professor requests. And there have been courses which require 3 different platforms and I had to decide which course is a bigger priority.*

3. Course material costs affect ODU students' academic performance (progress, opportunity, success) at a higher rate than other VA students.

In the areas of progress (taking fewer courses 45%), opportunity (not registering for specific courses 43%, or withdrawing from them 26%), and success (earning poor grades 39%, and failing 18%), course material costs have hurt ODU students' academic careers at slightly higher rates than other Virginia students. In all cases, ODU student responses were 2-9% higher.

For a subset of students, these experiences are frequent.



There were nearly 100 responses to the follow-up question: Can you please tell us more about how the cost of course materials has influenced your educational progress? Common themes were that the costs caused high levels of stress, impeded learning and success, and were just not affordable. Here is a sampling:

- *It is always stressful during the first half of the semester to search for the books for the cheapest price. I also struggle with the fact that I can afford renting a book more than buying, but I wish I could afford to buy it because it would be helpful in my career to keep.*
- *Some courses are not available to rent the book, this has caused me to be weeks behind because of me having to choose tuition over materials.*
- *Adds financial strain. Some courses require textbook, and it's eventually never needed. Test grades lower due to lack of textbook material.*
- *The cost would deter me from buying until I could afford it. This would hinder my understanding of the course and even make me miss taking some of the required tests through the linked e-textbooks. Overall, textbook costs hindered my learning and contributed to lower grades.*
- *The costs of course materials are a huge barrier. I have had to choose which classes I think the books are most important for and skate by without the textbook in the other classes.*
- *I think that I do not get to access some of the more specific and nuanced material which could impact my learning. As well as receiving less practice and examples influences how well I do in specific courses.*
- *The textbooks are very expensive. A lot of the time, you barely use them in the class. Which is a complete waste of money.*
- *The requirements to buy multiple books for a course has financially taken a burden which in turn requires me to work more, which takes me away from my time studying.*
- *University textbooks are predatorily overpriced. This should be apparent to anyone who compares the prices of textbook in 1962, to prices of textbooks in 2022. The prices of textbooks have not risen in a manner consistent with inflation. The prices of textbooks have risen by orders of magnitude. I have found ways to circumvent the traditional system of textbook acquisition, otherwise the expense would have been too great.*
- *It's caused me to go into greater credit card debt because I have to use my credit card to pay for books.*

- *I am on a fixed income. Taking care of a household, children and school is overwhelming. I am visually impaired, and a majority of my books need to either be put on cd or get the books/material in large print. That's costly.*
- *The cost of materials, including books, lab equipment, and other course requirements (background checks, CPR, HIPAA/OSHA certifications) are not factored into my cost of attendance. I am not able to get as much from my student loans as these needs are not represented by the school's tuition or other costs. This results in me struggling to financially stay afloat during the school year with insufficient time to work due to a rigorous course load.*

A few students mentioned issues with the DayOne program (called IncludedED at the time of the survey).

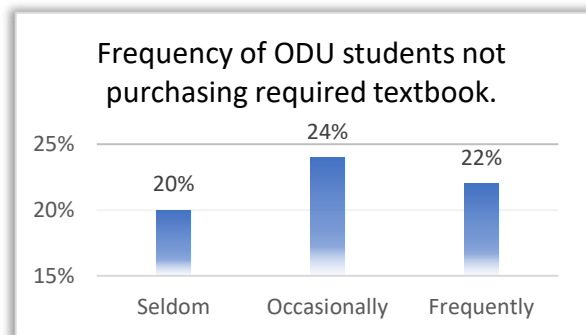
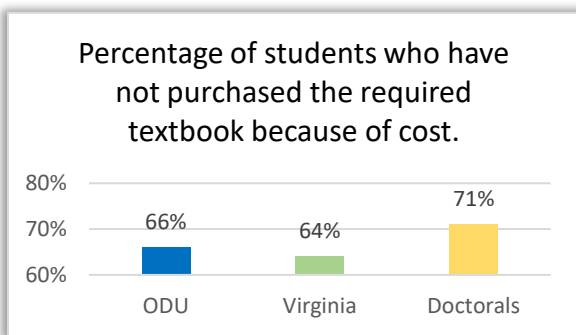
- *In the event my course was part of the IncludedED program (cost of book included in tuition, and not optional), I was forced to purchase the book, costing anywhere from \$150-over \$200 per book. For this reason, I tried to avoid those classes as much as possible.*
- *I've had to limit the amount of credits I can take because ODU thinks it is okay to force me to purchase every book by making them included. This takes away my option to rent or find cheaper alternatives.*
- *Sometimes I've had cases where we pay for a text included with our tuition. (And by that it's just a rolled in cost) and the teacher requests a separate text.*

4. ODU students find alternatives to purchasing costly course materials.

ODU recommends that students budget \$650/semester (\$1,300/year) for course materials. Yet, when asked to estimate what they actually spent during the semester of the survey, only 2% of respondents spent \$601 or more. More students spent \$101-300 than other amounts:

- 19% spent under \$100
- 23% spent \$201-300
- 8% spent \$401-500
- 31% spent \$101-200
- 12% spent \$301-400
- 4% spent \$501-600

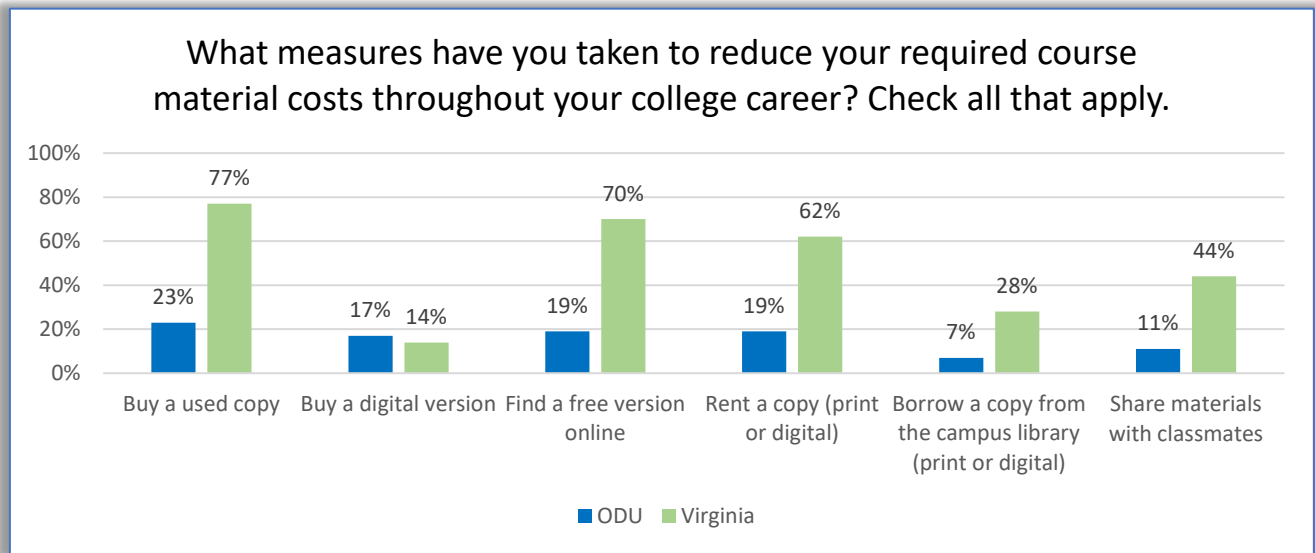
So, what do they do instead? Many students just do not buy the textbooks. While not as high a percentage as other students at doctoral institutions (71%), 66% of ODU respondents choose not to buy textbooks. For 22% of those students, this happens frequently. Not having a textbook can lead to lower academic performance.



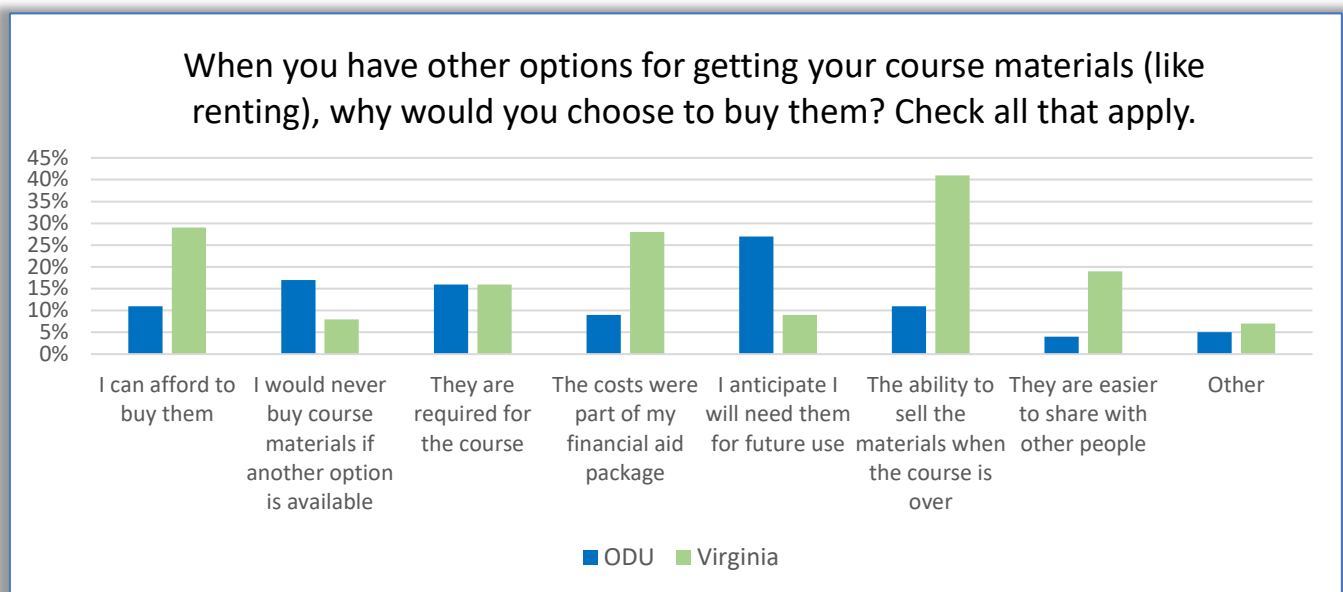
Comments included:

- *I have to admit there were a couple courses I have taken where I didn't buy the textbook because even the online version was over 100 dollars. So sometimes I don't even purchase the book.*
- *I take fewer courses each semester.*
- *I have bought textbooks from other retailers such as Amazon and Barnes and Noble.*

One student acknowledged illegally downloading a textbook instead of buying one.



The top reason most ODU students will decide to buy a textbook is if they will be valuable for future use. This was a common theme in the comments sections. They will also buy if they know the textbook is required for the course, but they would never buy if there were another option available.



5. If cost were not an issue, ODU students prefer print course materials (if they had to make a choice).

The print preference was surprisingly in line with all Virginia respondents (52%), although slightly higher for ODU (56%).

About print preference, many students mentioned the tactile features of print and the ability to take notes in the margins:

- *I prefer physical books because I can touch the pages and even highlight if I need to. I can put tabs in the book and go right back to where I was, compared to having to log onto a site and wait for it to load just so I can read what I need.*
- *I prefer hardcopy books, they help me study better. However, I usually do not purchase hardcopy books because they are the most expensive.*

Several students mentioned eye strain with electronic books:

- *Sometimes I get so tired of looking at screens.*
- *I like the print version because it doesn't bother my eyes as much and it's easier to reference when I'm taking online courses.*
- *Paper format decreases associated headaches from increased screen time.*

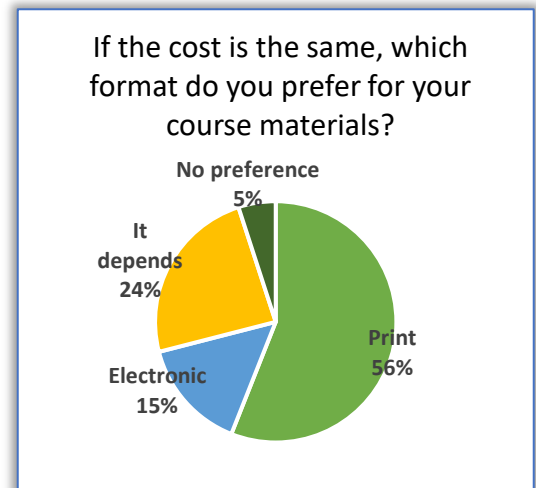
Comments on electronic book preference included:

- *Easy access wherever I might be.*
- *I don't enjoy having a stack of heavy books to carry around when they can all be on my laptop or phone.*
- *I feel getting e-textbooks is the way to go if I need to take notes for a particular assignment.*

"It depends" was a frequent comment:

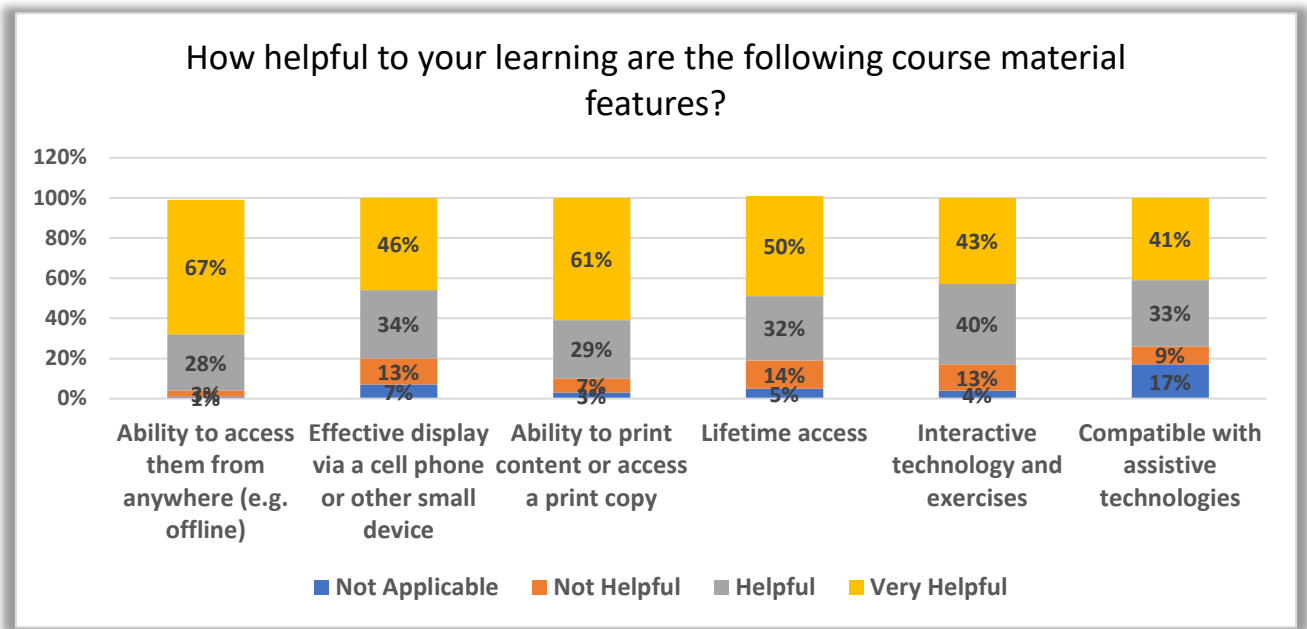
- *Print is much easier to handle and read and learn from but it's very heavy to own multiple large textbooks. It's also nice to be able to search an e-book for specific terms.*
- *I prefer reading hard copies, but digital versions have better search options for open-book tests.*
- *I prefer both, I need both depending on the scenario. It is nice to be able to read at night which I use my phone and read it electronically before bed (phone lighting), and it is also nice to be able to search the book for precise topics electronically. I enjoy having a real textbook to read during the day and to annotate if wanted, also when I get a headache from so much computer time from classes. I am an online student.*
- *Whatever is cheapest.*

Several students indicated that for online classes, they preferred electronic, while for in-person courses, they preferred print. Cost was also a factor, with some believing that electronic textbooks are cheaper than print.

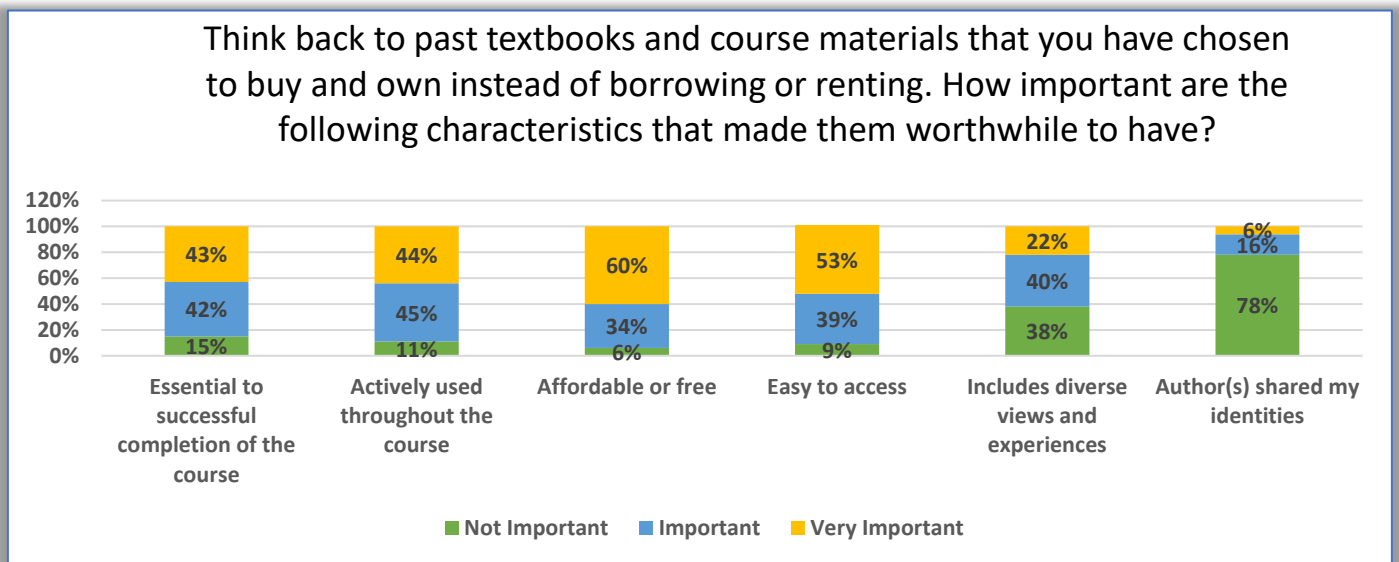


6. ODU students also prefer materials that are easy to access, available beyond the course, affordable, actively used throughout the course, and essential to success in the course.

The most helpful characteristics of course materials are the ability to access materials from anywhere (e.g., online) 67%; the ability to print content or access a print copy 61%; and having lifetime access 50%. The first two choices are not incongruous: accessing online, but also having print or the ability to print.

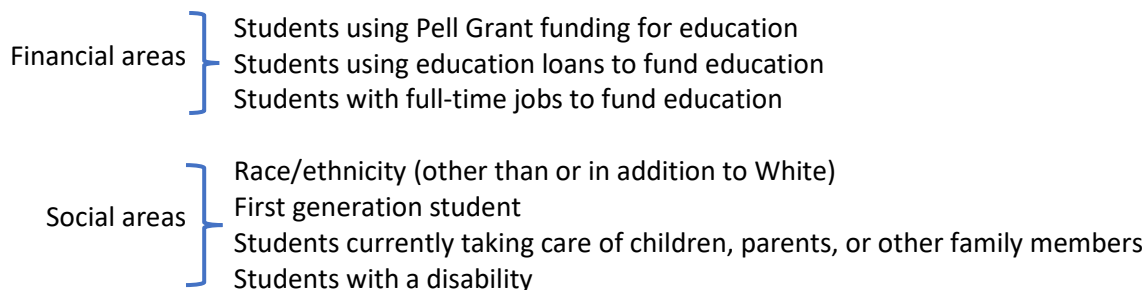


If ODU students are going to purchase/own a textbook, it is very important that the materials are affordable or free (60%) and that they are easy to access (53%). They also want to know that the course materials will be actively used throughout the course (45%) and that the student will be successful in the course if they have the materials (43%). What they do not find as important is that the textbook author shares the student’s identity (78%). Having diverse views and experiences in the materials is also less important to our students.



OTHER FINDINGS FROM THE VIRGINIA SURVEY

VIVA set out to identify areas of financial and social concern to assess the effect of course material costs on educational equity. They identified seven areas of concern:



The survey found that course material worries and damage to academic careers are amplified by these areas of concern. For example, “students with 5+ areas of concern were four times as likely to have failed a course and three times as likely to take fewer courses due to course material costs . . . than students with 0 areas” (VIVA, 2021).

ODU’s specific demographics (Appendix A) were not correlated with the Virginia findings because of IRB protocols.

SUMMARY

Although ODU representation in the survey was not as high as for other institutions, the overall results are very similar to other Virginia students. On average, 78% of students have some degree of worry about the cost of course materials, which are a factor in large academic decisions of major/minor/institution selection and in students’ academic performance (progress, opportunity, success). For ODU students, these factors figure slightly higher. All Virginia students find alternatives to purchasing costly course materials, including not purchasing them. If cost were not an issue, and if they had to choose, Virginia students overall prefer print for course materials. ODU students also prefer materials that are easy to access, available beyond the course, affordable, actively used throughout the course, and essential to success in the course.

One comment summarizes many of the concerns of ODU students:

As a recipient of the Post 9/11 GI Bill from my military service, I receive a yearly book stipend of \$1000 for the entire academic year. ... Even with the stipend amount, I could never afford to buy brand new books, and always rented when possible. When not possible to rent, or on the few occasions I thought the book would be useful beyond the course, I made every attempt to buy used. In the event my course was part of the IncludED program (cost of book included in tuition, and not optional), I was forced to purchase the book, costing anywhere from \$150-over \$200 per book. For this reason, I tried to avoid those classes as much as possible. ... Childcare and schooling are expensive, I just do not have the extra funds lying around to spend so much on a book I am only going to use for a few months and never look at again. And I hate that there were some courses I avoided just because of the cost of books, but the reality is that I can get the same information from online or used sources and the cost of everything else makes it not worth it.

APPENDIX A: ODU Response Descriptors – Demographics

Age: The average age of student respondents was 25 years old, with the oldest being 60.

Degree Level: The majority of students responding were undergraduates 73%, while 19% were master's level students, and 8% doctoral.

Academic Level: Of the undergraduates responding, most were juniors and seniors:

- Seniors 37%; juniors 37%; sophomores 15%; freshmen 11%

Other Student Categories: International students: 3%; Part-time students: 25%; Full-time students: 69%

Disability: 11% of respondents identified as having a disability, with 6% preferring not to answer. When asked if their disability affects how they use course materials, 72% said Yes. A few students provided comments:

- *I am neurodivergent (ADHD) and tangible, printed copies are a sensory thing for me. I study better, and retain the information better, when I have a physical copy of the text or information required. I often have to print information that is digital in courses that don't offer physical copies of a text or information due to my unique study habits and information retention issues. A physical copy helps me to not only study better but also retain the information.*
- *I am visually impaired. Therefore, I need to look at things close and things that have large print. All of the books are small print. Having the ability to move the paper closer will help. However, it is time consuming. Therefore, electronic helps. I can zoom in and out and find key words if necessary.*
- *I prefer online textbooks. I have ADHD and receive accommodations for it, and I tend to be more successful using online materials rather than textbooks. I get distracted easily when reading physical textbooks.*

Race/Ethnicity: The majority (51%) of respondents identified as white, while 19% identified as black. Other options:

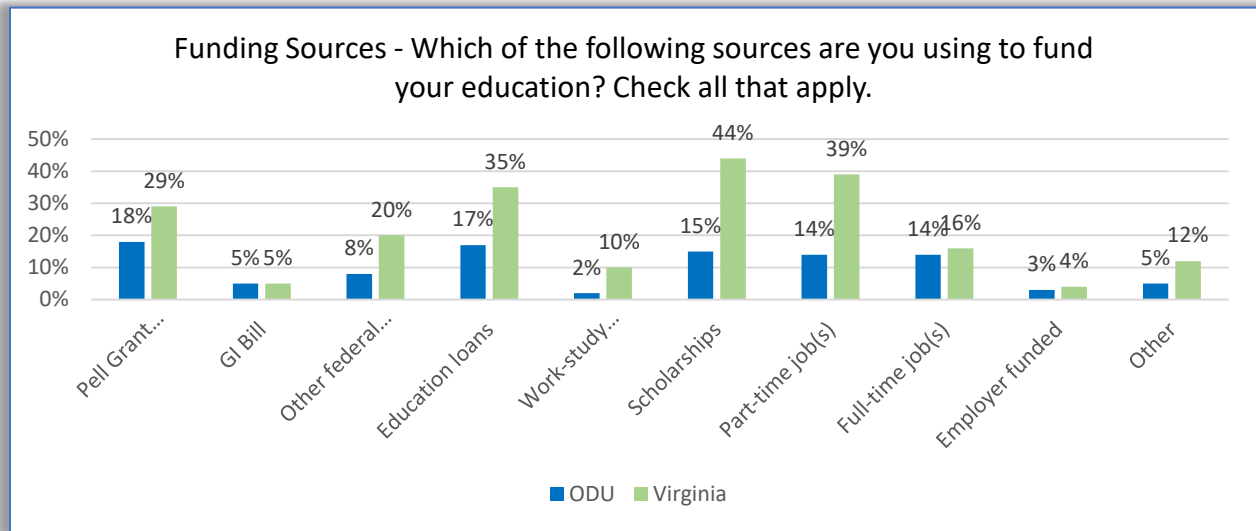
- Hispanic 8%; Asian or Pacific Islander 7%; Multi-Race 5%; American Indian or Alaskan 3%; Another race or ethnicity 1%; Prefer not to answer 7%

Gender Identity: 75% of respondents identified as women; 20% as men; 1% as nonbinary; and 5% preferred not to answer.

First Generation Students: 36% of respondents identified as first-generation students.

Care Providers: 32% were currently taking care of children, parents, or other family members.

Funding Sources: A majority of ODU student respondents were Pell Grant recipients 18%, had educational loans 17% or scholarships 15%, and/or they worked full-time 14% or part-time 14%.



When asked “How does your employment affect your academic success?,” answers were:

- A mix of positive and negative 57%; mostly positive 15%; mostly negative 14%; not at all 5%

APPENDIX B: References

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