

# The Soaring Cost of Textbooks – What’s the Answer?

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Textbooks are very expensive and represent a growing segment of the costs for a student to attend a college or university. According to a [report](#) of the [US Public Interest Research Group \(USPIRG\)](#) published in 2014, textbook costs have gone up 82% during the last decade. The study found that the average student spends more than \$1100 a year on textbooks. Because of the high cost, some students forego buying required textbooks for classes, thus putting their academic success in jeopardy. Of those 65% who reported that they did not purchase a required text because of cost, 94% of them indicated it hurt them academically. While the price of individual textbooks varies greatly, depending on subject matter and many other factors, the [National Association of College Stores \(NACS\)](#) reported that the average cost of a textbook in 2011-2012 was \$68 dollars.

Since textbook costs are increasing three to four times faster than the rate of inflation, that average price will have increased substantially in today’s market. For some classes, the cost of an average textbook will be far above the general average. On the [NACS FAQ on textbooks](#), they reported that students estimated spending an average of \$370 on required course materials during the fall 2013 term.

Students and faculty at USFSP frequently ask the Library to purchase textbooks and put copies on Reserve. Unfortunately, the Library lacks the funding to be able to do this. The Library’s budget for buying all books has not gone up in a decade, even though the cost of buying books has gone up 49% in that same time period ([according to data provided by YBP Library Services, a vendor that supplies books to thousands of academic libraries around the world](#)). Much as the Library would like to accommodate the requests to purchase textbooks, the cost would be prohibitive and would further diminish our declining ability to buy the materials that are needed to support the academic programs of the University.

What, then, is the solution for our students at USF St. Petersburg? The Poynter Library has had discussions with USFSP Student Government leaders for the past several years to develop partial subsidies of a Library Reserves textbook program. So far, those discussions have not borne fruit.

[USPIRG](#), the [Student Public Interest Research Groups \(SPIRGs\)](#) and others are now advocating the adoption of open textbooks. While students can save substantially through options like [renting textbooks](#), buying used books, and bookswaps on campus, open access textbooks are seen as the long-term solution by many groups. SPIRG has produced an Affordable Textbooks Policy Guide that advocates for faculty to make use of and contribute to the creation of open textbooks and for their institutions to support them in this effort. As the SPIRG Policy Guide notes, “Not only are open textbooks more accessible, but they have the potential to save students \$100 on average, per course, per semester. If every student at the University of Wisconsin – Madison were assigned just one open textbook each semester, it would generate over \$6 million in student savings in just one year.” (see the full report [here](#)) There are currently hundreds of open textbooks available for use. Projects such as the [Textbook Affordability Project](#) are working to identify high-quality open textbooks from which faculty can choose. Open textbooks are one aspect of the broader [Open Access movement](#) that the Library has been working to promote through annual programs and through the [USFSP Digital Archive](#). In a previous blog posting ([Open Sesame](#)), I provided Peter Suber’s definition of open access literature as:

- digital
- online
- free of charge, and

- free of most copyright and licensing restrictions

This fall, the Poynter Library will be celebrating Open Access Week October 20-26, 2014. Either during that week or at some other point this fall, the Poynter Library will be working with students, faculty, and other interested parties to discuss textbook costs and possible solutions.

Check in with the Library after the fall semester starts for updates.