Critical Education

Volume 16 Number 3 August 15, 2025 ISSN 1920-4175

Increasing Student Expenses on Course Materials

The Cost Inefficiencies of Equitable Access

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Simon, N. P., & Clifford, M. (2025). Increasing student expenses on course materials: The cost inefficiencies of equitable access. *Critical Education, 16*(3), 148-165. https://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v16i3.187064

Abstract

The high and ever-rising cost of college textbooks is a significant financial burden for students and their families, hindering access to essential learning materials and affecting academic performance and retention rates. To address these issues, instructors and universities are exploring cost-control methods such as free source materials, Open Educational Resources (OER), and automatic textbook billing (ATB) for affordable materials. This study analyzes the impact of automatic textbook billing, more specifically Equitable Access at one institution, examining potential savings for students. However, findings suggest that Equitable Access does not benefit most students financially. It disproportionately benefits students in higher-paying majors with expensive textbooks, subsidized by those in lower-paying majors with cheaper textbooks, raising equity concerns. This issue is particularly significant for students of color, who are more likely to graduate from lower-paying majors, bearing an undue financial burden.

The exorbitant cost of textbooks has become a significant financial burden for many college students, leading them to forgo purchasing or renting the course materials recommended by their instructors (Vitez, 2018). The gravity of this issue is underscored by the fact that textbook prices have surged by 1,041 percent from January 1977 to June 2015, far outpacing the rate of inflation (Popken, 2021). This lack of access to essential learning materials can negatively impact students' academic performance, ultimately affecting graduation rates and overall retention within higher education institutions in the United States.

In response, faculty and universities actively seek viable alternatives to alleviate the financial strain on students. Many advocate for adopting Open Educational Resources (OER), freely accessible educational materials. These resources can significantly reduce costs and increase the accessibility of course content. Other institutions are exploring the implementation of Inclusive Access, Equitable Access, or Automatic Textbook Billing programs aim to provide affordable and comprehensive access to digital course materials.

Many people use the terms Inclusive Access and Equitable Access interchangeably, but there is a key distinction between them (Barnes & Noble College, 2022; Inclusive Access, n.d.). Inclusive Access programs operate at the course level, providing digital course materials to students enrolled in participating courses. Students are charged based on the cost of the specific materials required for each course. In contrast, Equitable Access programs are implemented across the entire institution. Under this model, all students receive all required physical or digital materials for all their courses, typically for a fixed cost per credit hour. Students benefit from a brief opt-out period at the beginning of the course, after which they are automatically charged for the materials if they do not opt out. Proponents argue that this model, due to its low opt-out rates, allows publishers to offer volume discounts, thereby providing substantial savings to students.

To evaluate the benefits of Equitable Access, a case study was conducted, tailored to the specific circumstances of Eastern Connecticut State University (ECSU or Eastern), one of the four state universities of the Connecticut State Colleges & Universities (CSCU). A hypothetical mathematical model was developed to compare the hypothetical costs of students accessing course materials through equitable access with the costs of the less expensive options offered by the college bookstore. This comparison focused on the Spring 2024 semester, in anticipation of the System Office's planned implementation of the Equitable Access Policy for the Fall 2024 semester across the four state universities and the online institution.

The objective is to identify the costs and benefits of using Equitable Access at Eastern, with a particular emphasis on helping students save money. By analyzing the hypothetical costs incurred by students and comparing them to the hypothetical projected savings of the Equitable Access model, this article aims to provide a clearer picture of the financial impact and potential advantages, if any, of this program to students. This analysis will enable decision-makers to make informed choices about adopting Equitable Access and ensure that it effectively supports our students' financial needs.

Literature Review

Cost Saving

Inclusive Access and Equitable Access are portrayed by various stakeholders such as bookstores, publishers, and administrators as a cost-saving initiative aimed at assisting students (Hurley, 2020; McClendon & McMillin, 2020). For instance, at the University of Arizona, the bookstore estimated that students saved over two million dollars between the Fall 2016 and Fall 2027 semesters through 123 courses utilizing Inclusive Access, compared to the cost of new print materials (Cuillier, 2018). Unfortunately, many reported savings are merely estimates provided by bookstores or publishers, often lacking clear explanations of how the savings are calculated, as illustrated in the following examples. Dority Baker and Lindburg (2021) noted that from the Fall 2019 to the Spring 2021 semester, Inclusive Access benefited more than 29,600 students across over 390 classes, resulting in an estimated savings of $1,861,530. Evans (2019) highlighted the cost-saving benefits of OhioLINK for Ohio students, noting that in 2018, McGraw-Hill's Inclusive Access program alone saved students $2.7 million on course materials compared to the previous year's expenditures on the same materials. Ocean County College states "In the fall of 2019, the average full-time OCC student taking 15 credits paid between $563.25 and $677.38 for books and electronic course materials. Under the new model, you will pay $298 — a savings of more than 50%." When navigating the webpage, readers encounter details about the First Day Complete Program. While other institutions may take different approaches, the landing page at OCC neglects to explicitly mention that this program is facilitated by Barnes & Noble College and that the public institution is directly collecting student's fees for a private for-profit business.

Bookstores give different names to their Inclusive Access and Equitable Access Programs. Barnes & Noble calls it "First Day" (Inclusive Access) and "First Day Complete" (Equitable Access). Follett calls it Follett Access. As Follett suggests to students, "Yes! Publishers provide significant discounts to participate in this program and those discounts are passed on to [students] via this program." (Follett, n.d.). Barnes and Noble state that with First Day Complete students save "an average of 35%-50%." (Barnes and Noble College, n.d.)

While Inclusive Access and Equitable Access appear to offer financial savings to students, several concerns undermine this claim. Firstly, the data supporting these savings are provided by the bookstore, which has a vested financial interest in promoting these models. This conflict of interest raises questions about the objectivity and accuracy of the reported savings. Moreover, the methodology used to calculate these estimated savings lacks transparency. Without a clear understanding of how these figures are derived, it is challenging to assess their validity and reliability.

Jhangiani (2017) explains that the purported savings are often based on the highest possible cost of course materials—typically, the price of a new hardcover textbook. This benchmark does not reflect the variety of more affordable options available to students, such as used books, rentals, or digital versions. By comparing the Inclusive Access and Equitable Access costs to the most expensive option, the program's savings are likely exaggerated, failing to account for more economical alternatives. These concerns collectively suggest that the financial benefits of Inclusive Access and Equitable Access may not be as substantial as advertised, necessitating a closer examination of its actual impact on student expenses.

The Florida Virtual Campus (2022, p. 25) surveyed more than 13,000 students in 2022. Among these students, 18.8% were enrolled in an Inclusive Access initiative and “53.2% indicated that they did not feel that the program reduced their overall textbook costs.” The US Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) has raised significant concerns regarding automatic textbook billing. In an analysis of 31 public higher education ATB contracts, PIRG discovered that students face challenges in assessing the savings provided by accessing their course materials through this method. Moreover, PIRG suggests that students often do not have sufficient time to compare and contrast pricing information, which further complicates their decision-making process.

Of particular concern are the legal clauses in 68% of publisher contracts, clauses which could result in the reduction or elimination of discounts if enrollment quotas are not met. Additionally, PIRG found that ″33 percent of contracts had the potential for annual uncapped price increase and 21 percent had the potential for twice-annual uncapped price increases. The remaining half of contracts in our study did not define how often prices could be adjusted.” (Vitez, 2020, p. 11)

Opting Out

Inclusive Access and Equitable Access incorporate a clause in contracts that automatically enrolls students in the program, while still allowing them the option to opt out. Both bookstores and publishers defend that this practice fosters high participation rates and enables publishers to pass savings on to student consumers. However, critics argue that this "opt-out" policy effectively creates a captive audience, boosting providers' profits. Additionally, students have voiced concerns about a lack of information regarding the Inclusive Access and Equitable Access programs, the challenges of opting out, and unknowingly paying for course materials twice through tuition fees.

The Florida Virtual Campus survey (2022) outlined several reasons why students chose to opt out of the program. Among these, 22% expressed a desire to explore alternative options to secure better deals on course materials, while 18.2% cited discomfort with the program concept. Additionally, 10.7% mentioned financial constraints, and 8.8% found the program inconvenient. Students also provided further insights:

> “Because it incentivizes textbook companies to overcharge students and I would not be able to keep the textbook. What is the point if I do not have ownership and am not able to reference my own materials in my field of study…”
>
> “The program cost was not worth it, when some courses didn't require materials and others could be purchased for less than the program cost.”
>
> “I could almost always find them cheaper myself and I was not pleased that they were charging me without really trying to inform me. It took way too many steps to opt out. Seems suspicious.”

These comments highlight students' concerns about cost, transparency, and the ease of opting out of the Inclusive Access and Equitable Access programs.

Renting Course Materials

The practice of renting course materials, with the option to purchase them for an additional fee, introduces significant concerns for students who wish to maintain access to the material for future reference or use in subsequent courses within their major. For example, at Eastern, the biology department uses one textbook in four different courses, and at least one professor has told students that the text is suggested but not required. Discussions with colleagues from the education department revealed that some course materials are used in three different courses. In this situation, students renting their course material with an Equitable Access program have the option to purchase the material at an additional cost. However, such a purchase can pose a financial burden, particularly for students already grappling with tuition fees and other educational expenses. This dilemma forces students to weigh the value of long-term access to the material against the immediate financial strain of purchasing it outright. Consequently, the model of renting course materials, while initially cost-effective, may inadvertently restrict students' ability to build a comprehensive library of resources essential for their academic and professional development.

First Day Access

In addition to cost savings, some research on Inclusive Access and Equitable Access highlight significant improvements in student access to course materials. Students who do not opt out of the program are granted access to the necessary resources either on or before the first day of class (Cuillier, 2018). This early access is particularly beneficial, as it ensures that all students start the semester on an equal footing, ready to engage with the coursework from day one.

This early access also alleviates faculty concerns about students not having the required materials. As a result, faculty are less likely to need to negotiate extensions on assignments for students who lack access to course materials, thereby streamlining the educational process. Faculty can proceed with their planned syllabus without delays, ensuring a more consistent and uninterrupted learning experience for all students.

Additionally, Inclusive Access and Equitable Access save students' valuable time. They no longer need to spend considerable time searching for affordable course materials, comparing prices, and dealing with the logistics of obtaining them. This convenience allows students to focus more on their studies, enhancing their overall academic experience.

The theory that early or first-day access to course materials improves student outcomes is a key reason why many advocates support the adoption of Open Educational Resources (OER). Research by Colvard et al. (2018) and Fischer et al. (2015) has shown that students demonstrate positive achievements in courses when they have timely access to free and open materials. However, Spica's findings (2021, p. 206), highlight significant disparities in student success, even with early access to materials provided by Inclusive Access. The findings reveal that "compared to White students, nonwhite students are on average 34% less likely to pass with a grade of A-C. Learners over age 25 are 52% more likely than learners under age 25, and non-Pell recipients are 14% more likely to pass than Pell recipients." Her most important finding is that First Day Access is insignificant in light of these other variables.

Improving Grades

In a study conducted by Moore (2023) at Waukesha County Technical College, findings comparing 2,985 students who did not utilize Inclusive Access with 2785 students who did indicate that the implementation of Inclusive Access led to a 2.75% increase in the number of students achieving a grade of C or higher. Additionally, Moore (2023) highlighted that the proportion of

Black students earning a grade of C or above rose to 12.8% following the adoption of Inclusive Access. However, these results are countered by Spica's (2023) research, encompassing 13 community colleges in Tennessee during the Fall of 2019. Analyzing data from 88,946 students, Spica observed no significant statistical advantages or disadvantages in academic performance associated with participation in an Inclusive Access program.

Moore (2023) uses student data from Spring 2015 to Fall 2019 from multiple sections of only 6 of the courses offered at WCTC, at least 3 of which are math courses. The panel data set is from courses that are early adopters of Inclusive Access such that the data set includes at least 5 semesters before Inclusive Access and depending on when adopted the specific course moved over to Inclusive Access at least 3 semesters post-Inclusive Access in these courses. Still, it appears that this varies by course. Moore uses a series of two-by-two chi-square tests of independence to determine a statistically significant difference in the number of students receiving grades C or higher between students enrolled in Inclusive Access courses before and after adoption by total population, gender, ethnicity, and age. Some of these demographic groups showed statistically significant differences in the success rate before and after the point in time when Inclusive Access was adopted. However, this approach is flawed for several reasons. Chi Square tests only identify association and not causation, as the test cannot account for the myriad of other variables that could influence results. This method cannot demonstrate that Inclusive Access causes improved student performance. It can demonstrate an association but, without the inclusion of courses without Inclusive Access as a control to demonstrate difference, it's impossible to be sure that the results are due to Inclusive Access instead of omitted variables, the most glaring of which is time. Furthermore, since this pertains to the adoption of Inclusive Access, the analysis is more akin to a pre-test and post-test design, making a McNemar's test potentially more appropriate than a chi-square test.

In contrast, Spica's analysis employs hierarchical modeling with data on student outcomes from fall 2019 across all Tennessee's 13 community colleges, which included 141 courses and 41 course areas. Those outcomes were then compared with outcome data from the prior 2 fall terms (Spica, 2023). Spica ran multiple fixed effects equations controlling for institution, semester, course, ethnicity, older student, Pell eligible, and once these variables were accounted, the impact of participation in the Inclusive Access program was not found to be significant. Thus, the differences in research outcomes could be attributed to the relative sophistication of research methods employed.

Accessibility Concerns

Accessibility may emerge as a significant concern within the framework of Inclusive Access, as highlighted by Dority Baker and Lindburg (2021). For instance, consider a scenario where course materials are primarily available in digital formats through a platform integrated into the institution's LMS. While this integration may seem convenient for many students, students with disabilities may encounter barriers in accessing the content. For instance, visually impaired students may struggle with screen reader compatibility or the lack of alternative text descriptions for images and graphs. Similarly, students with mobility impairments may face challenges navigating platforms unequipped with accessibility features such as keyboard shortcuts or compatibility with assistive technologies.

Inclusive Access, Equitable Access, and Digital Inequity

Multiple inequities challenge the inequities of Inclusive Access. For example, in poorer, urban or rural communities where many first-generation students come from and not every student has the privilege to own or access a quality device, or where reliable internet access is scarce the Inclusive Access distribution method inadvertently excludes those who lack the necessary technological resources. Imagine a student attempting to participate in online lectures or access digital textbooks, only to be blocked by slow internet speeds or a device ill-suited for academic tasks. Despite IA's intention to level the playing field, the reality of digital disparities remains a stark reminder that true inclusivity encompasses not just access to materials but also access to the means required to utilize those materials effectively.

Data Collection

Another pressing issue associated with Inclusive Access is the extensive data gathering and potential sale of student consumer data by bookstore and publisher stakeholders. As Weyland (2022, p. 38) highlights, "the data they can collect with digital materials opens a lucrative new market, allowing them to diversify into analytics services." For students who are concerned about safeguarding their data privacy, opting out of Inclusive Access may seem like the only way to protect their personal information. However, this option is not without consequences. In courses where assignments and assessments are integrated into digital platforms provided by publishers, students who opt out may find themselves at a disadvantage. They could be excluded from essential course activities, resulting in reduced participation grades or difficulties completing assignments. In some extreme cases, students may be left with no choice but to accept a lower grade or withdraw from the course altogether if the materials are mandatory for participation and no alternative arrangements are provided.

Purpose of the Study, Research Questions, and Data Collection

The purpose of this research is to explore the financial implications of Equitable Access (EA) at Eastern Connecticut State University. With the escalating costs of textbooks significantly affecting students' ability to access essential course materials, this study aims to analyze whether EA offers a more affordable alternative. By comparing the costs of course materials through EA with the less expensive options available at the college bookstore for the Spring 2024 semester, this research seeks to determine the potential cost savings and identify which groups of students may benefit or be disadvantaged by the EA program. The study's findings will provide insights into the effectiveness of EA in reducing students' financial burdens and guide informed decision-making regarding its adoption at ECSU.

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. Does Equitable Access offer a financial benefit to students?
2. If Equitable Access is financially beneficial, what is the extent of the cost savings for students?
3. Which student demographics are most likely to benefit and/or be disadvantaged by Equitable Access?

Publicly available information on the class schedule was utilized to compile a comprehensive list of all undergraduate courses offered during the Spring 2024 semester at ECSU. For each course, information was gathered, including the course title, course number, session details (i.e., full or partial semester), the number of enrolled students, and the full-time or part-time employment status of the faculty teaching the course. The publicly available bookstore website was subsequently visited to determine the required course materials for each course and to identify which courses did not require the purchase of materials. For each item available for purchase, both the less expensive option, typically associated with renting a textbook or accessing an electronic copy, and the most expensive option, often associated with purchasing a new physical copy, were identified.

Publicly available data from the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) on bachelor’s degree recipients from ECSU, specifically for the most recent year available (2022), was utilized to examine the distribution of students across various majors by race and gender. The data was also used to assess how differences in textbook prices and Equitable Access impact different student groups. Additionally, the IPEDS data was integrated with survey data from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2023) on salaries received by recent college graduates, categorized by major, to calculate the average salary for different academic areas across the university.

Data Analysis and Findings

Figure 1 illustrates the differences in the average costs of course materials between the campus bookstore and Equitable Access. When comparing the average cost of the less expensive course material option from the campus bookstore ($63.78) to the cost of Automatic Textbook Billing ($56.60), it initially appears that Equitable Access saves students' money for courses requiring textbooks. However, this comparison does not account for students who shop for lower-priced course materials from off-campus vendors. It also excludes courses that do not require any purchased materials, such as those that use reading materials on reserve at the library or items available through the institution’s library databases.

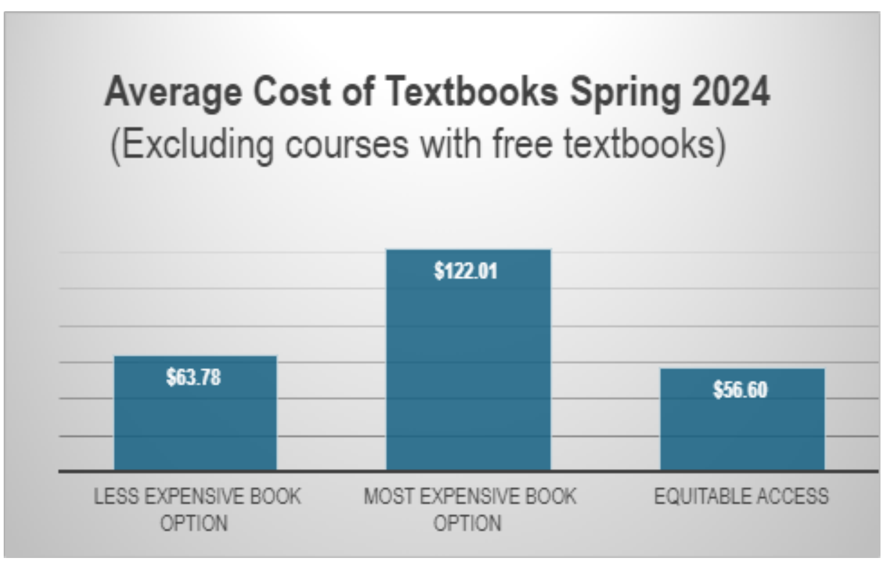

Figure 1. Average cost of textbooks.
Source: Data collection from Spring 2024 Class Schedule and BN Course Materials and Textbook

Figure 2 depicts the percentage of courses requiring students to purchase, rent, or access commercial textbooks and access codes compared to those that do not. The data reveals that only 30% of courses at Eastern require students to obtain textbooks or access codes. Recognizing students' financial constraints, many faculty members opt to use library resources or freely available Open Educational Resources (OER). Considering that only a minority of courses require textbooks and access codes, the average costs were recalculated, and the updated figures are presented in Figure 3.

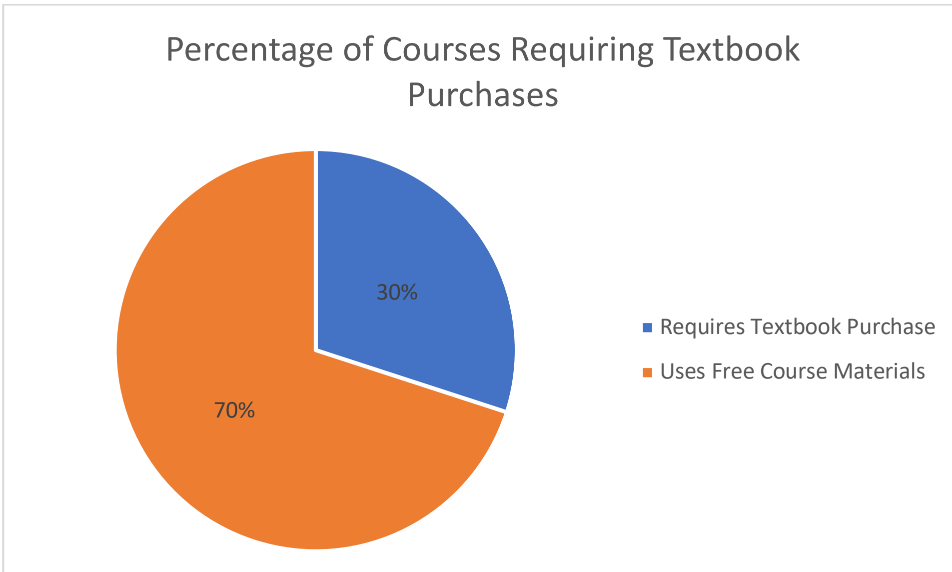

Figure 2. Courses without buying a textbook.
Source: Data collection from Spring 2024 Class Schedule and BN Course Materials and Textbook

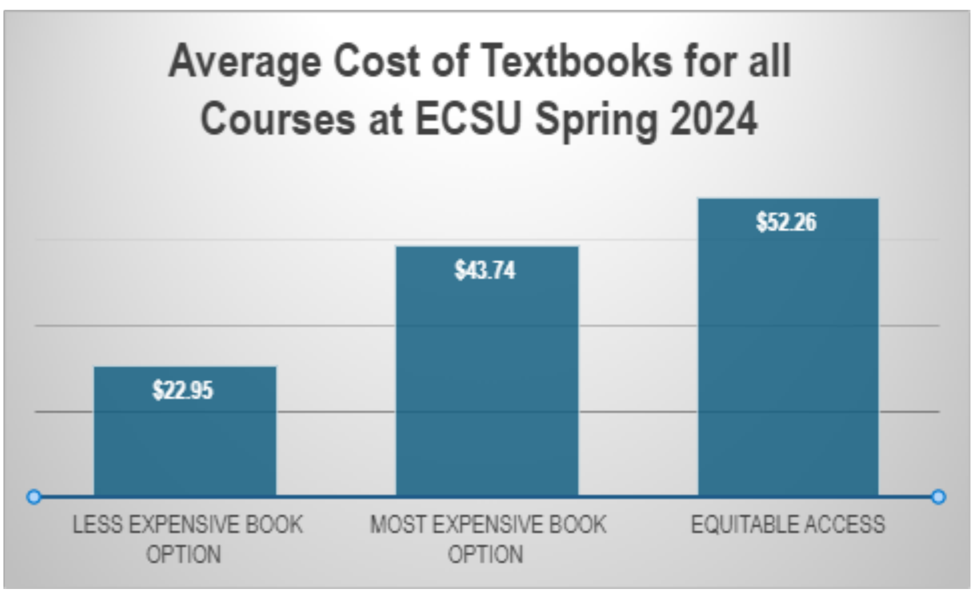

Figure 3. Average cost of textbooks for all courses.
Source: Data collection from Spring 2024 Class Schedule and BN Course Materials and Textbook

Figure 3 demonstrates that, when considering the average cost of course materials for all courses offered at Eastern during the Spring 2024 semester, Equitable Access, which initially seems economically beneficial, actually turns out to be the most expensive option at $52.26. This is more costly than even the priciest option at the bookstore, which averages $43.74.

The reason Equitable Access ends up being more expensive is that students are paying $18.75 per credit, even for courses that currently use free course materials. To further illustrate, consider the financial impact if every student at Eastern utilized Equitable Access during the Spring 2024 semester, they would collectively pay $832,387.50. In contrast, if every student selected the cheapest option provided by the bookstore, they would collectively pay $426,320.65. The $406,066.85 difference between these two scenarios highlights that, despite the initial appeal, Equitable Access may not be the most cost-effective solution.

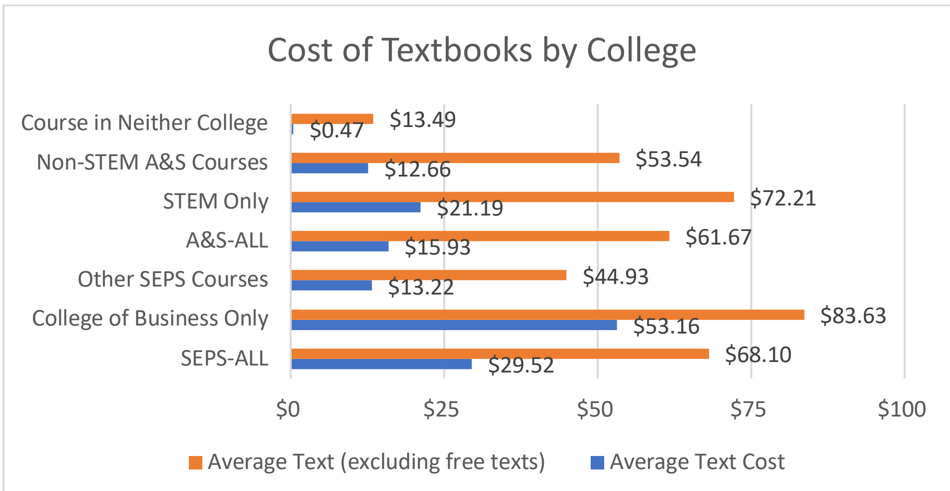

Figure 4. Costs of textbooks by college.
Source: Data collection from Spring 2024 Class Schedule and BN Course Materials and Textbook

While students in the aggregate may not benefit from Equitable Access, some students might see cost benefits. Figure 4 examines the costs to students by discipline, comparing the textbook costs for courses listed under various majors within the School of Arts and Sciences (A&S) and the School of Education and Professional Studies (SEPS). Further breakdowns are made into STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) and non-STEM courses within A&S, as well as College of Business (COB) courses and SEPS courses outside COB.

Figure 4 reveals that courses outside these colleges, such as those in the Honors Program, First Year Program, or Liberal Arts Capstone courses, have the lowest costs. When comparing the average textbook costs between A&S and SEPS, the difference is not significant. However, within SEPS, courses outside the College of Business are almost half as expensive as those within the College of Business when focusing on purchased textbooks, with the gap widening further when average textbook costs are considered. Within Arts & Sciences, the average price of course materials are less than the costs for textbooks in the College of Business but more expensive than other SEPS majors, with STEM textbooks being the most expensive.

The students who stand to benefit the most from Equitable Access are those in the College of Business. Courses in this category require more books and more expensive course materials, as shown in Figure 4. Figure 5, on the other hand, highlights that the highest percentage of savings under Equitable Access would be for students in the College of Business. This figure shows that within the College of Business, 35.71% of the courses have textbooks where the less expensive option through the bookstore is more expensive than Equitable Access. Less than 10% of the textbooks within SEPS but outside COB are more expensive than Equitable Access, meaning that 90% of the courses within this area are less expensive than Equitable Access. For the College of Arts and Sciences, 14% of STEM courses and 13% of non-STEM courses have course materials more expensive than Equitable Access.

Thus, under Equitable Access, students enrolled in courses with less expensive textbooks would be subsidizing those taking courses with more expensive textbooks. The students taking courses within the College of Business are most likely to benefit from this subsidy, while students in other areas of the institution are more likely to be providing that subsidy.

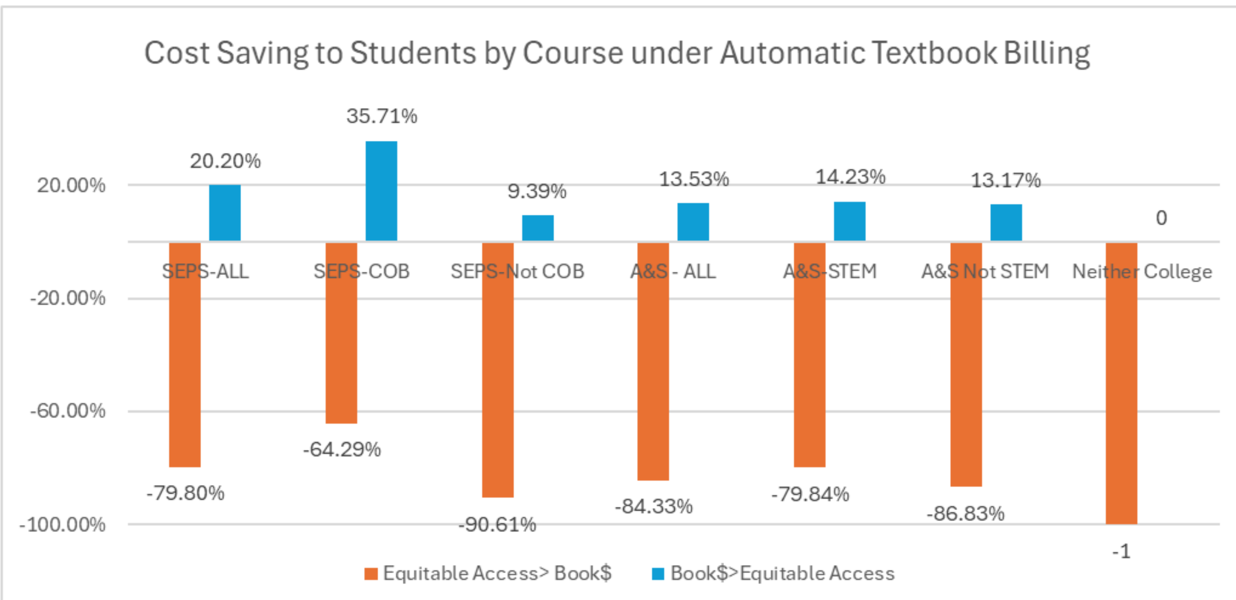

Figure 5. Cost saving to students by course under Automatic Textbook Billing.
Source: Data Source: Spring 2024 Class Schedule and BN Course Materials and Textbook

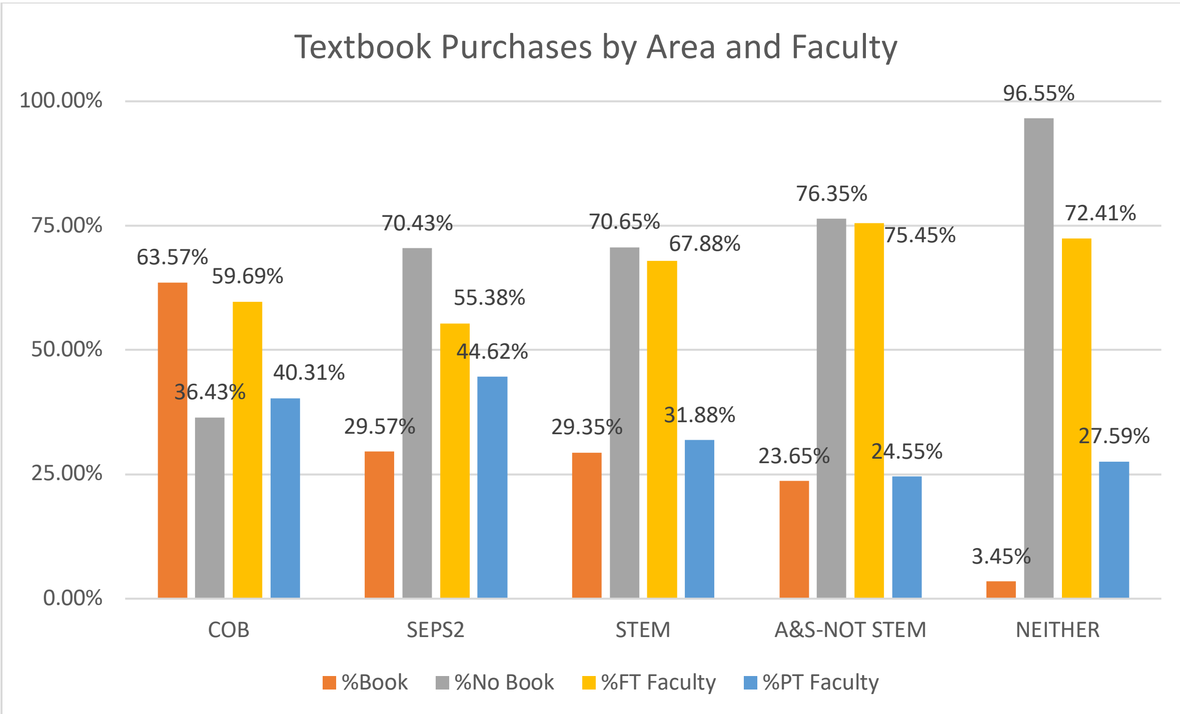

Figure 6. Textbook purchases by area and faculty.
Source: Data Collected from Spring 2024 Class Schedule, Departmental Webpages, and BN Course Materials and Textbook

Figure 6 illustrates that 63.47% of the courses within the College of Business require the purchase of course materials, whereas the rest of the majors within the School of Education and Professional Studies (SEPS) only require textbook purchases 29.57% of the time. This means that not only do SEPS courses have a much lower rate of textbook purchases, but the textbooks required for these courses are also less expensive, as shown in Figure 5. Consequently, fewer students taking SEPS courses benefit from Equitable Access, while those in the College of Business face more frequent and costly textbook purchases than other groups within the university.

The impact of faculty status on the choice between free course materials and purchased textbooks is next examined, with attention drawn to the significant presence of part-time faculty members in the College of Business. Figure 7 displays that, except for the College of Business, part-time faculty across the institution use purchased course materials more frequently than full-time faculty. In the College of Business, however, a higher percentage of full-time faculty order textbooks compared to part-time faculty.

This trend suggests that hiring more part-time faculty, while reducing labor costs for the institution, increases textbook costs for students. One potential explanation for this is that part-time faculty may rely more on the support provided by textbook publishers, such as test banks and PowerPoint slides, which come at an additional cost to students.

Thus, while the institution might save on salaries by hiring more part-time faculty, this practice inadvertently raises the cost burden on students due to the increased reliance on purchased course materials.

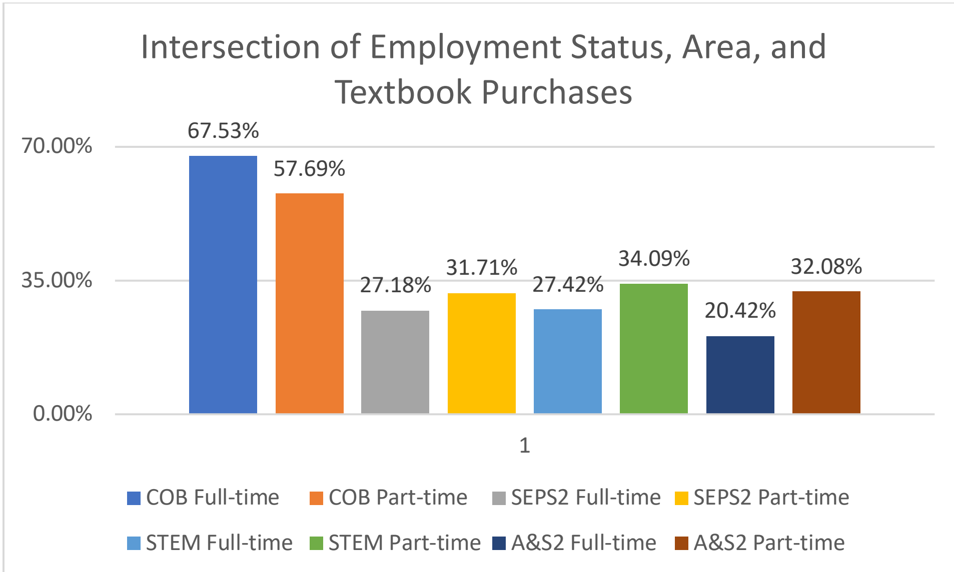

Figure 7. Intersection of employment status, area, and textbook purchases.
Source: Class Schedule, Departmental Webpages, and BN Course Materials and Textbooks

Table 1, based on publicly available data from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2023), shows the distribution of graduates across the institution for 2022, the most recent year for which data is available. This data reveals that 58.75% of graduates had majors within the College of Arts and Sciences, with 43.30% graduating in non-STEM fields and 15.44% in STEM majors. The School of Education and Professional Studies (SEPS) accounted for 37.80% of graduates, with 20.09% from the College of Business and 17.71% from SEPS outside the College of Business.

Table 1 also highlights that the most popular majors for women were non-STEM majors within the College of Arts and Sciences, while the least popular majors for graduates, excluding the BGS degree, were in the College of Business. Conversely, for men, the most popular majors were within the College of Business.

Additionally, Table 1 provides a weighted average salary for graduates within each area, based on NACE salary data and weighted by the percentage of students within each major. The table indicates that graduates from the School of Education and Professional Studies out-earned those from the College of Arts and Sciences. Graduates from non-STEM majors had the lowest average earnings, while those from the College of Business had the highest average earnings.

Table 1. Distribution of graduates across the institution for 2022

	Average Salary	Grand total%	Grand total men%	Grand total women%
Total		100.00%	40.39%	59.61%
SEPS-ALL	$ 53,049.70	37.80%	19.44%	18.36%
COB	$ 60,279.23	20.09%	12.53%	7.56%
SEPS2	$ 44,850.36	17.71%	6.91%	10.80%
A&S-ALL	$ 47,206.61	58.75%	19.33%	39.42%
STEM	$ 57,997.69	15.44%	7.02%	8.42%
A&S-NOT STEM	$ 43,358.42	43.30%	12.31%	30.99%
BGS degree	$ 58,179.00	3.46%	1.62%	1.84%

Source: IPEDS (2022) and NACE (2023)

Table 2. The Percentage of Graduates within each area by Gender and Ethnicity

	White total	White men	White women	Asian total	Asian men	Asian women	POC-A Total	POC-A Men	POC-A Women
Total	65.87%	28.73%	37.15%	3.02%	1.30%	1.73%	23.33%	8.10%	15.23%
SEPS-ALL	26.13%	14.04%	12.10%	1.08%	0.65%	0.43%	7.45%	3.35%	4.10%
COB	13.93%	8.86%	5.08%	0.86%	0.54%	0.32%	3.89%	1.94%	1.94%
SEPS2	12.20%	5.18%	7.02%	0.22%	0.11%	0.11%	3.56%	1.40%	2.16%
A&S-ALL	37.90%	13.82%	24.08%	1.94%	0.65%	1.30%	14.47%	4.10%	10.37%
STEM	10.04%	5.08%	4.97%	0.86%	0.43%	0.43%	3.89%	1.08%	2.81%
A&S-NOT STEM	27.86%	8.75%	19.11%	1.08%	0.22%	0.86%	10.58%	3.02%	7.56%
BGS Degree	1.84%	0.86%	0.97%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1.40%	0.65%	0.76%

Source: IPEDS (2022)

Table 2 illustrates that the College of Business, which boasts the highest average salary, also has the highest percentage of white men graduating from it, at about 31%. In contrast, only about 24% of men of color and 13% of women of color graduate from the College of Business. Meanwhile, 45% of graduates of color and 50% of women of color earn degrees in non-STEM fields within the College of Arts and Sciences, which is the lowest average paying area.

This disparity presents a significant issue under Equitable Access. Students of color, who are more likely to graduate in lower-paying fields, would end up subsidizing the textbook costs of their wealthier white peers in the higher-paying College of Business. Equitable Access not only increases costs for students but also exacerbates existing equity issues, disproportionately impacting students of color who earn less upon graduation. This highlights the need for addressing these equity concerns in any textbook cost strategy.

Conclusion

This study highlights several critical aspects of the Equitable Access program and its implications for students at Eastern. Contrary to the purported benefits of cost savings, our findings suggest that Equitable Access does not benefit students as a whole. While the initial appeal of a reduced average cost per textbook ($56.60 for a three credits course) under Equitable Access (EA) seems promising compared to the bookstore's lowest average cost option ($63.78), this does not hold when considering the broader context. Specifically, when accounting for the fact that only 30% of courses at ECSU require the purchase of course materials, EA emerges as the more expensive option overall ($52.26) compared to the bookstore's most expensive option ($43.74).

Limitations of the Research

The limitations of this study are noteworthy and should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the analysis relies on publicly available data from a single semester (Spring 2024) and graduation data from 2022. This temporal limitation may not capture variations in textbook costs and course material requirements across different semesters. Second, the study focuses exclusively on one institution, limiting the generalizability of the results to other universities with different demographic and academic profiles.

Another limitation is the lack of comprehensive data on students' purchasing behaviors and preferences. Alongside the collection and analysis of data from the bookstore and EA, students were surveyed during Spring 2024 to capture their actual practices for acquiring course materials (Simon & Clifford, 2024). However, since the survey reflects responses from only one semester, repeating it across multiple semesters and institutions would help ensure the reliability and generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal data would offer deeper insights into student behavior over time and help assess the effectiveness of existing and suggested policies.

Future Research Directions

To address these limitations and enhance the robustness of future studies, several steps are recommended. Expanding the data collection to include multiple semesters and a diverse range of institutions would provide a more comprehensive view of the cost dynamics associated with EA and traditional textbook purchasing. Additionally, surveying students about their experiences and practices in acquiring course materials would offer valuable qualitative data to complement the quantitative analysis.

Longitudinal studies are particularly essential to understand the cumulative financial impact of textbook costs over a student's academic career. Such studies could also explore how different demographic groups are affected by these costs and the long-term implications for equity and access in higher education.

Implications

The findings from this study have far-reaching implications for both institutional policy and future research. Institutions like ECSU must reassess the effectiveness of Equitable Access programs, which, despite their intent to reduce student costs, may unintentionally deepen financial disparities. While students in majors that require expensive textbooks—such as nursing or STEM fields—may benefit from these programs, the majority of students receive little to no meaningful financial relief. In some cases, these initiatives introduce additional challenges, such as mandatory digital access fees or restrictive course material formats, which can disproportionately impact students with limited financial resources or inadequate technology access.

To foster true equity and reduce the financial burden of course materials, institutions must adopt more sustainable and inclusive solutions. Expanding the use of Open Educational Resources (OER) and leveraging existing library resources are critical strategies. OER provide instructors with the flexibility to tailor content to course objectives while ensuring students have free and permanent access to high-quality educational materials. Library-licensed resources also offer access to scholarly content at no additional cost to students, further alleviating financial strain.

Achieving these goals will require a multi-faceted institutional commitment. Investment in professional development for faculty, incentives for course redesign, and infrastructure to support OER integration are essential. Faculty must receive adequate training and resources to effectively adopt and create OER, while institutional support structures should facilitate collaboration between librarians, instructional designers, and faculty.

Ultimately, the shift toward sustainable and equitable models of education demands more than just redistributing costs. This shift requires institutions to address the root causes of financial inequality in higher education by actively eliminating barriers. Policies must be designed to provide every student—regardless of their socioeconomic background, field of study, or access to technology—an equal opportunity to succeed. Through these efforts, institutions can move toward a future where educational equity is not merely an aspiration but a lived reality for all.

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We extend our gratitude to the reviewers for their insightful comments, which greatly improved the quality of this paper. We deeply appreciate their valuable contributions and support. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Maryanne Clifford, Department of Economics and Finance, Eastern Connecticut State University, 83 Windham Street, Willimantic, CT 06226 Email: cliffordm@easternct.edu

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