

Solving the Textbook Crisis with Open Educational Resources

How Three Colleges
Are Doing It

A white paper from the educators at SoftChalk LLC.



Rising Textbook Costs Are Hurting Graduation Rates

Buying textbooks isn't as easy as it used to be...or as affordable.

Decades ago, buying college textbooks was fairly simple. The campus bookstore stocked required course materials, and students purchased them. Many students bought and sold used books through the bookstore to save a little money, too.

But times have changed.

Textbook prices have become a major obstacle in students' efforts to obtain their degrees. In some cases, that obstacle is insurmountable.

*The price of college textbooks increased **88%** between 2006 and 2016.*

College textbooks can cost upward of \$200, and sometimes close to \$400. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, between 2006 and 2016, the price of college textbooks increased 88%, four times the rate of inflation.

The College Board advises that students at four-year universities should budget \$1,240 for books and supplies each year; students at two-year community colleges should budget \$1,440.

The College Board aims to help students and parents prepare sufficiently by estimating high. Reports of actual expenses are lower, but they still paint a grim picture.

The National Association of College Stores (NACS) reported a decline in student spending on textbooks (\$701 in 2016 and \$484 in 2018). The decline doesn't mean that textbooks cost less. It means that students are searching for—and need—alternatives to costly textbooks.

32% of students are turning to free educational resources (OER).

The NACS itself notes that 32% of students turned to free educational resources (also known as Open Educational Resources, or OER). Other reports show that students aren't even buying textbooks because they simply can't afford them.

But what about buying used books or borrowing them from friends? Even this has become difficult. Publishers release new editions every two to four years, which prevents students from reselling previous editions to the bookstore and forces others to spend more on new books.

A publishing tactic known as "bundling" has further complicated things.

Bundling sells textbooks and other course materials as a package. Although Congress requires publishers to sell books individually as well, many publishers work around this by selling bundles at the campus bookstore and individual materials at other establishments. This makes the process murky and inefficient for students.



For some courses, students must purchase "access codes" in addition to their textbook. The access codes gain students entry to electronic course materials. The codes expire after the term, making the textbook and the electronic materials no longer useful. Students can't resell the textbook (and recoup some money), and they can't refer to the electronic materials later.

It seems like the real winners in education are the textbook publishers. But shouldn't it be the students?



As Costly Textbooks Hold Students Back— Graduation is at Stake

Students are having a hard time using textbooks for their original purpose: learning and getting closer to graduation.

Many students say costly textbooks have significantly affected their academic experience.

A 2014 study conducted by the Student Public Interest Research Groups (SPIRG), *Fixing the Broken Textbook Market*, surveyed students nationwide and found that:

- 65% didn't buy required textbooks due to cost.
- 48% said textbook cost impacted how many/which classes they took.
- 94% were concerned that forgoing the textbook would hurt their grade.
- 55% were "significantly concerned" that forgoing the textbook would hurt their grade.

SPIRG's report notes that steady course progression is important to graduation. "It is especially concerning that this process may be being undermined by high textbook costs," the report says.

The effect of costly textbooks isn't just a one-two punch that students can tough-out until graduation. Statistics imply that students are having a harder time making it to graduation.

Experts believe that costly textbooks are one of the key culprits contributing to the nation's suffering graduation rates. Pointing to the results of numerous student surveys, Chief Academic Officer of Lumen Learning David Wiley says that this is "beyond dispute."

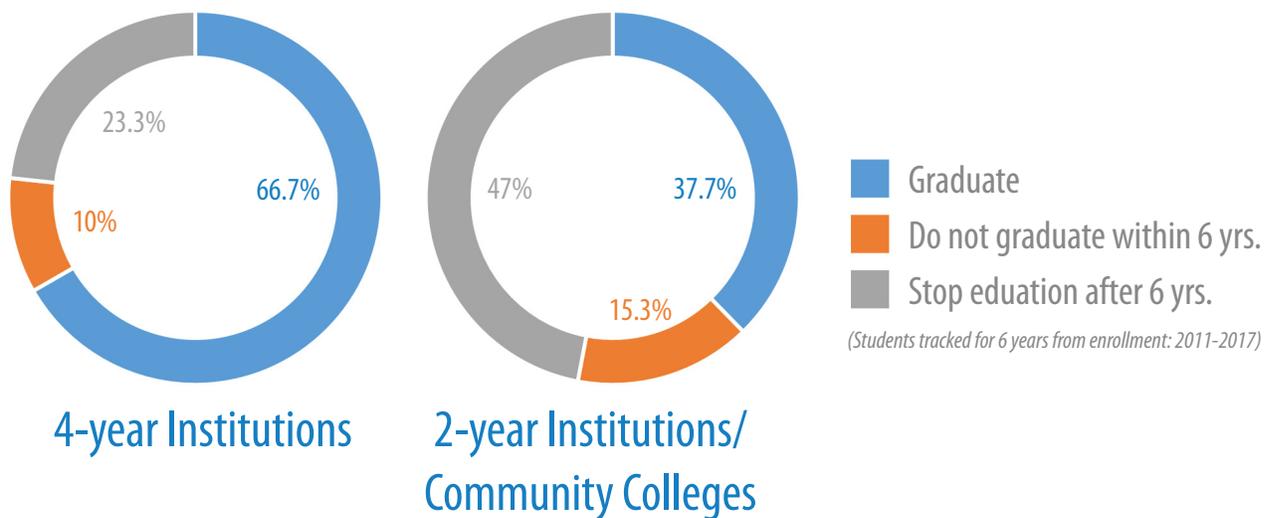
In 2016, Florida’s college and university system surveyed over 20,000 students, asking them about the ways costly textbooks impact their learning experience. Their responses appeared in the report, *Student Textbook and Course Materials Survey*:

- 57.6% took fewer courses
- 45.5% didn’t register for a course
- 26.1% withdrew from a course
- 37.6% earned a poor grade
- 19.8% failed a course
- 66.5% didn’t buy required textbooks

These statistics indicate that students are taking longer to complete coursework, and that it’s taking longer to graduate. The longer graduation is delayed, the more money students lose from time they could be earning a paycheck from a good job.

National graduation rates seem to corroborate these implications. In 2017, the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) published its report on graduation rates. Tracking students for six years from enrollment (since 2011), graduation rates are 66.7% for students at four-year institutions and 37.7% for students at two-year institutions, or community colleges.

This means that one-third of students seeking a “four-year” degree aren’t graduating in even six years. And, the NSC reports that 23.3% have stopped their education altogether after six years. Furthermore, two-thirds of students aren’t earning their degree at a “two-year” community college. Forty-seven percent of community college students discontinued their education after the sixth year.





For Community College Students—The Struggle is Worse

Community college students experience unique stressors. Many struggle to provide for families while working a full-time job. They often seek additional help, through remedial academic support or financial assistance.

41.4% of community college students rely on financial aid to pay for textbooks.

Expensive textbooks strap community college students with more burdens. Reports show that they spend more on books than their four-year student counterparts. Florida's study found that 56.3% of community college students spent over \$300 on textbooks in a semester, while 50% of university students spent over \$300 on textbooks in a semester. The study also showed that 41.4% of community college students rely on financial aid to pay for textbooks. SPIRG's 2016 study found that a disproportionate number of community college students relied on financial aid to cover textbook costs. Of the 30% of students who use financial aid to pay for textbooks, about 50% of them are community college students.



Solving the Textbook Crisis with Open Educational Resources

Open Education Resources (OERs) are changing the learning landscape, gradually showing students and professors that costly textbooks are not the only option.

OERs are electronic, free and customizable academic materials, written by professors and easily accessed by students. OERs are available to others under Creative Commons licenses, allowing other professors to adapt the materials according to their needs. Students have access to this valuable information for life.

OERs can save students thousands of dollars throughout their college careers, and they provide many invaluable benefits:

- **Maximize faculty's time.** Professors don't waste time updating lesson plans according to a new textbook.
- **Enhance quality of instruction.** Faculty can be innovative.
- **Eliminate textbook costs.** Students can use money saved for other purposes.
- **Improve student learning.** Students can focus on learning, earn better grades, and graduate on time.

Nationwide, faculty applaud the OER movement. The Inside Higher Ed/Gallup report, *Survey of Faculty Attitudes on Technology*, found that 93% of faculty think textbooks and course materials are priced too high, and 92% think that they should assign free OERs. SoftChalk Cloud is a platform that professors can use to provide OERs to their students.

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Professors can use SoftChalk's multiple features to design instructional content, collaborate with colleagues and track student progress. Many professors have already experienced the ways SoftChalk's powerful and interactive features both improve student learning and sharpen their own teaching skills.

How Three Colleges are using SoftChalk to Replace Textbooks and Increase Student Success

Among SoftChalk's many clients are three colleges, who provide their students with excellent learning materials without charging them astronomical prices:

- **Columbus State Community College (CSCC)**
- **Kennesaw State University (KSU)**
- **South Louisiana Community College (SLCC)**

These educators have implemented SoftChalk Cloud in a range of disciplines, and all have seen their students engage in the learning process freely and with enthusiasm. And, learning outcomes demonstrate that their courses are meeting their objectives.

We invite you to hear their stories!

COLUMBUS STATE COMMUNITY COLLEGE (CSCC)

CSCC assistant professor Cathy Bill and her team knew they needed to replace costly textbooks with OERs because their students were having to choose between paying for books and paying for living expenses. They used SoftChalk Cloud to create free electronic materials for two Anatomy and Physiology courses.

COLUMBUS STATE

COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Bill and her team wrote content, developed interactive lessons, created homework, and more. They found it much easier to use than a previous Apple-based platform, which wasn't compatible with every student's technology. Students could access SoftChalk-created materials anytime, anywhere, and the professors could track their progress easily.

This transformed student learning.

According to Bill, students weren't just memorizing notes anymore; they were engaged with all of the course material. Additionally, SoftChalk helped them:

- **Arrive at positive learning outcomes.** Students' exam grades were good.
- **Improve the quality of material.** Content was easily updatable and presented in an understandable way.
- **Optimize usefulness of material.** Professors could use content in multiple courses.
- **Edit content centrally.** All courses linked to that content could be automatically updated.
- **Save students \$116-\$181 per student, per course.** Cumulatively, this equaled **\$180,000** per semester in textbook costs.

Bill and her team might say this initiative hit a home run. But all things considered, it might be more accurate to call it a grand slam.

Read more about how [Columbus State Community College](#) successfully integrated SoftChalk into their curriculum.

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY (KSU)

KSU Director of Distance Education Tamara Powell and her team believed that free access to course materials could increase course retention and allow students to spend money on additional classes. As a result, this could reduce students' overall debt.



Powell and her team implemented SoftChalk Cloud in their technical communications program, creating a course full of interactive lessons, quizzes, videos, and activities. They created their own content and used other content from OERs in their field. The results were encouraging, with 95% of students responding positively to the change. Plus, grades improved, and fewer students dropped, failed or withdrew from the course.

They estimated that SoftChalk helped them save students a cumulative amount of \$55,611 in textbook costs.

Powell found that, in addition to saving students money, SoftChalk's platform helped them create a more valuable learning experience for students. SoftChalk enabled them to:

- **Modify the course content easily.** Faculty were free of constraints imposed by fixed textbook progression.
- **Incorporate content from other experts.** Powell's team combined content from SoftChalk's vast OER database with their own content.
- **Keep the course student-focused.** Students could access the course materials in a variety of ways, depending on their learning style.

Overall, Powell and her team valued the flexibility and control they had over the course design. To be truly innovative and responsive to students' needs "was exhilarating and inspiring," Powell said.

Read more about how [Kennesaw State University](#) successfully integrated SoftChalk into their curriculum.

SOUTH LOUISIANA COMMUNITY COLLEGE (SLCC)

Lane Gunnels, a lead instructor in SLCC's Electrical Technology Program, used SoftChalk Cloud to test the OER option with a few lessons. He was impressed by his students' positive response, so he replaced costly textbooks entirely with free OERs through SoftChalk.



The impact of this decision didn't just save his students money; it revitalized the entire teaching and learning experience. Specifically, because of SoftChalk, Gunnels:

- **Improved students' focus and comprehension.** Content is written concisely.
- **Helped students build new computer skills.** Students naturally learn by using SoftChalk's interactive, user-friendly features.
- **Kept the course updated.** Easy changes were made according to rapidly changing technology.
- **Required student electricians to invest in something more useful than a textbook: tools.** They can use the tools in class and in the future.

Gunnels eliminated distractions and helped his students enjoy learning. He maximized his own time and made himself a better teacher. He enabled students to invest—smartly—in their futures. Isn't that what all students expect from a teacher?

"I was just trying to save a buck, and ended up taking my teaching and learning to a whole new level."

– Lane Gunnels, SLCC

Read more about how [South Louisiana Community College](#) successfully integrated SoftChalk into their curriculum.



SoftChalk Helps Move Students Toward Graduation

These stories demonstrate the immense power that OERs have in the classroom. Replacing costly textbooks with OERs does more for students than save them money; ultimately, it increases opportunities for them elsewhere.

When professors report that SoftChalk helped students participate more actively in the learning process, build new skills, earn better grades, and put money to better use, it's evident that SoftChalk is a big part of the OER solution.

SoftChalk helps students engage in learning through a 21st Century, state-of-the-art platform, that—unbelievably—is free to them.

The most important part? SoftChalk is part of a bigger movement, one of the most exciting movements that we can think of. It helps move students toward graduation. Toward success. Toward their future.

NEXT STEPS

Let us help you help your students achieve their goals today! Click below to request a 30-day trial, a live demo, or to purchase SoftChalk Cloud.

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ABOUT SOFTCHALK

SoftChalk, LLC is an award-winning provider of digital curriculum content authoring solutions for education and business institutions worldwide. Specializing in the development of intuitive, easy-to-use tools, SoftChalk products allow instructors to create powerful and professional-looking content for eLearning and smart classrooms in K-12, higher education and corporate training.

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