

Student Research Shows Free Materials Could Replace Expensive Textbooks

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Galloway, N.J. — Replacing expensive textbooks with free educational resources could reduce high college costs, but more professors and administrators need to promote the option to have an impact, according to student research published today by the [William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University](#).

The National Center for Education Statistics estimated that college textbooks and materials for the 2021-22 academic year cost an average of \$1,326 per student nationally. Over the last 50 years, prices increased at three times the rate of inflation, a research paper by Stockton senior Jessie Nash reported. Textbook costs have increased by 7 percent since 2020, outpacing increases in tuition, fees and housing, the report found.

“Textbook costs are a financial barrier to higher education that disproportionately affects minority, low-income, first-generation and food-insecure students,” said Nash, a [Social Work](#) major who produced her research as part of a Hughes Center internship.

Nash was awarded a Stockton University [Board of Trustees Fellowship for Distinguished Students](#) for her work on this subject in May. Nash is launching an online marketplace for used textbooks and other materials.

Open educational resources (OER), which include learning materials available for free, have the potential to improve educational equity, affordability and quality, the report said. The report added that by adopting OER, colleges could significantly reduce or eliminate costs associated with traditional textbooks.

- Open resource initiatives throughout the United States have provided more than \$1 billion in savings for students to date, estimates show.
- Other research has indicated that affordable course materials have helped improve student achievement through better course grades, higher enrollment intensity, lower withdrawal rates and higher student satisfaction.
- With OER, educators can modify, customize and adapt the resources to their specific instructional needs and to regularly update the materials to keep pace with rapidly evolving advancements.

“Any initiative that can save students money and make a college education more accessible, without compromising the quality of that education, is a win,” said Hughes Center Research Associate Alyssa Maurice.

However, a recent national survey of college educators and administrators by Bay View Analytics showed only one in four (27%) faculty members were aware of open-source initiatives at their colleges, while less than half (43%) of administrators knew about such programs. The results point to a greater need to spread the word about OER, Nash said.

Government policy plays a role in promoting the adoption of OER by increasing awareness of it and facilitating its use, the research paper said. New Jersey is one of 30 states that have enacted policies to encourage the use of OER. A 2019 state law requires institutions of higher education to develop an open textbook plan.

[Stockton University's OER program](#) is administered through its library, which provides background about open resources, links to materials and other state and national initiatives. In fall 2022, Stockton started identifying which courses utilize free materials in the course catalog and allows students to search for such courses when choosing their classes.

A federal bill proposed in both houses of Congress in March, The Affordable College Textbook Act, would direct the U.S. Department of Education to create grants for OER initiatives at the state and institutional levels. The proposal would seek to build upon the existing federal Open Textbook Pilot program, under which \$47 million has been appropriated and which has saved students an estimated \$250 million since its creation in 2018.

“OER initiatives at various levels have demonstrated the transformative potential of OER in addressing the challenges of affordability, accessibility, and quality in higher education,” the research paper concluded.

About the Hughes Center

The William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy (www.stockton.edu/hughescenter) at Stockton University serves as a catalyst for research, analysis and innovative policy solutions on the economic, social and cultural issues facing New Jersey, and promotes the civic life of New Jersey through engagement, education and research. The center is named for the late William J. Hughes, whose distinguished career includes service in the U.S. House of Representatives, Ambassador to Panama and as a Distinguished Visiting Professor at Stockton. The Hughes Center can be found on [YouTube](#), and can be followed on Facebook [@StocktonHughesCenter](#), X [@hughescenter](#) and Instagram [@stockton_hughes_center](#).

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