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Affordable Access in Action

A practical, scalable approach to expanding access, lowering student costs, and supporting stronger learning outcomes in higher education.

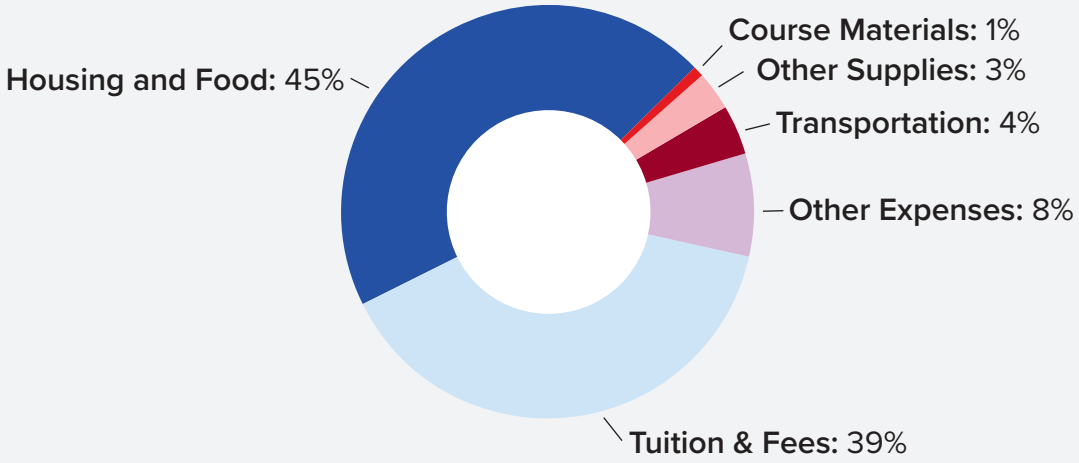


Affordable Access is a course material distribution model developed by institutions of higher education to deliver required learning resources to students, at a significantly reduced cost, on or before the first day of class.

Course Materials Account for 1% of Annual Student Costs

Public 4-year in-state on-campus

Although course materials only account for 1% of a student's annual spend at an in-state, four-year, public university, there is a dedicated focus to increase access and reduce the cost.



Source: Ma, Jennifer, Matea Pender, and Xiaowen Hu (2025). Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2025, College Board. p.11. research.collegeboard.org/trends/college-pricing

In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education issued federal guidance for institutions of higher learning to charge course materials as part of tuition and fees in an effort to ensure students have the critical learning resources they need to be successful on day-one of class.

(34 CFR 668.164(c)(2)(i)) specifies that course materials delivered through these programs carry the following three criteria:

- ✓ Must be the lowest market price
- ✓ Made available to students by the 7th day of class
- ✓ Must provide an option for students to opt out

These regulations paved the way for institutions to implement Affordable Access programs at **more than 2,000 U.S. institutions** to date.

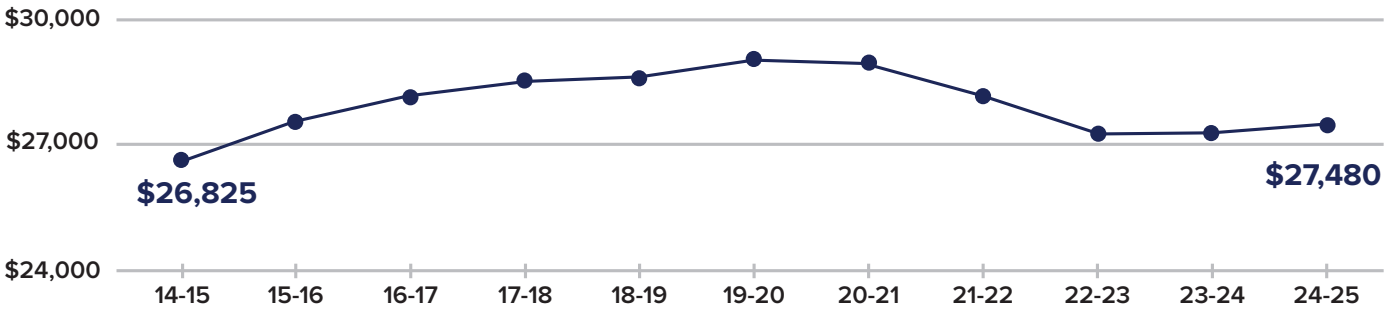
Decline in Student Spending

Student Spending on Course Materials is Down

Tuition, Fees, Housing, and Food of Four-Year Institutions (2014-2025)

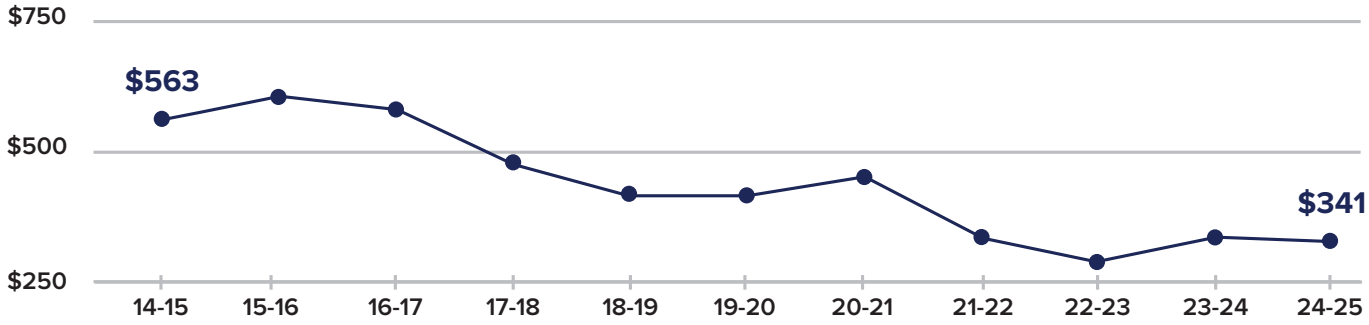
Four-Year University

Course materials are one of the few higher education cost categories that have decreased in price over time.[1]



Student Watch reports **40% decline** in student spending

Student Spending on Course Materials (2014-2025)



Ma, Jennifer, Matea Pender, and Meghan Oster (2024). Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2024, College Board. p.11, p.13. research.collegeboard.org/trends/college-pricing

Association of American Publishers. (2025, August 25). New reports from Student Watch and student monitor show that students are saving more and spending less on course materials – aap. AAP – The Voice of American Publishing. publishers.org/news/new-reports-from-student-watch-and-student-monitor-show-that-students-are-saving-more-and-spending-less-on-course-materials/

1 Day-One Access Supports Early Engagement and Retention

Access to required materials—especially on day one—supports early engagement, academic momentum, and persistence.[1]

When students begin without required materials, participation declines, early assignments suffer, and engagement can fall quickly.[1] Faculty see the immediate disruption; institutions may see its effects later in persistence and retention.

At Dallas College, **only 28% of students had all required materials on the first day before Affordable Access** was implemented. With day-one access as the standard for all students, students began better prepared and early barriers declined, contributing to improved persistence and retention.[2]



What the Data Shows
with Affordable Access:

Students are
27%
more likely to earn a passing grade.

Students are
60%
less likely to withdraw.

Of students,
84%
feel more prepared for class.

81%
of students say Affordable Access positively impacts their academic success.

Source: Tyton Partners, Course Materials in Higher Education (2025).

Evidence shows students who lack required materials begin behind, participate less, and are more likely to disengage early.[1]

2 Affordable Access Has Helped Reduce Course Material Costs

Due in large part to the shift to digital and programs like Affordable Access, student spending on course materials has declined by 40% over the past decade.

An industry-wide study completed by Tyton Partners found an average retail price of **$91** for digital course materials, reduced to **$58** through Affordable Access. Students in opt-out Affordable Access models **save on average $650 in an academic year.**[1]

These savings reflect a structural change: by pooling demand and requiring price transparency, institutions negotiate lower prices to coordinate access instead of leaving each student to navigate a fragmented retail market.[1]

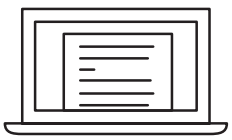




Students participating in Affordable Access programs

saved 36%

an average per course.



With Affordable Access program, students are

paying $58

an average per course for their course materials.

Savings reported throughout this section are derived from a database of 1,088 US-based institutions that have contracted with Barnes & Noble College, Follett, RedShelf, or VitalSource. Further detail on this database is provided in Appendix C of the Tyton Partners' recent report, Course Materials in Higher Education. Tyton Partners completed the analysis of this data to ensure data integrity, statistical significance of results, and institution and publisher anonymity.

3 Affordable Access Preserves Quality and Academic Choice

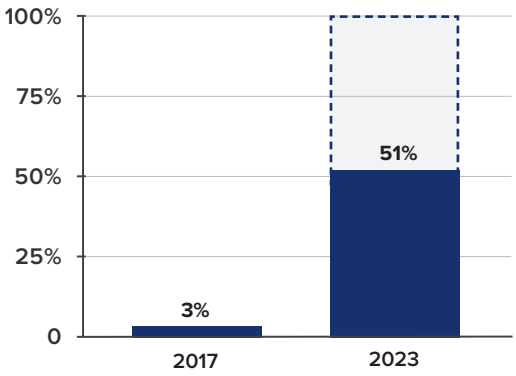
Student affordability, academic quality, and faculty choice can coexist.

Institutions using Affordable Access report that guaranteed day-one access to high-quality materials reduces troubleshooting and delays, allowing faculty to spend more time teaching. Course pacing improves, and students can complete early assignments as intended.[2]

Increased competition among providers helps lower prices while preserving faculty choice. Instructors can select commercially developed educational content, learning tools, or open-source resources based on how well they support course objectives, not solely on cost. Students also benefit from transparent pricing and streamlined access.[3]

Affordable Access lowers cost without lowering academic standards or choice of learner modality.

Faculty Reported Participation in an Affordable Access Program



Among the 49% of faculty who had never participated in Affordable Access, 70% expressed interest in participating in the future.



4 Faculty Support Often Grows After Implementation

Faculty support for Affordable Access tends to increase once programs are in place and benefits become visible.[1]

Faculty may initially raise appropriate questions about academic freedom, accessibility, implementation, and the student experience. Experience with a well-designed program can address those concerns.

Faculty Demonstrate Strong Support
About three-quarters of faculty want their institutions to maintain or expand Affordable Access after implementation, citing day-one access and less student confusion among the leading benefits.[1]

At Florida State College at Jacksonville and Dallas College, adoption expanded as faculty saw students arrive prepared, fewer class periods lost to access problems, and smoother instruction.[1]



75% of faculty

indicate wanting their institution to maintain or increase Affordable Access Programs.

Frequent communication, faculty engagement, and student transparency are central to an effective implementation and sustained support.

5 Students Value Simple, Predictable Access

Students place a high value on convenience, availability, and transparent pricing.[1]

When the choice is between automatic access at a lower, predictable price and navigating multiple sellers, editions, platforms, and deadlines, most students choose simplicity.

Most frequently cited benefits:

- Convenience of not shopping for materials (80%)
- Day-one access (78%)

Campuses consistently report low opt-out rates when access is guaranteed and pricing is transparent.[1] The value is straightforward: fewer purchasing obstacles increase access to critical resources students need to learn.



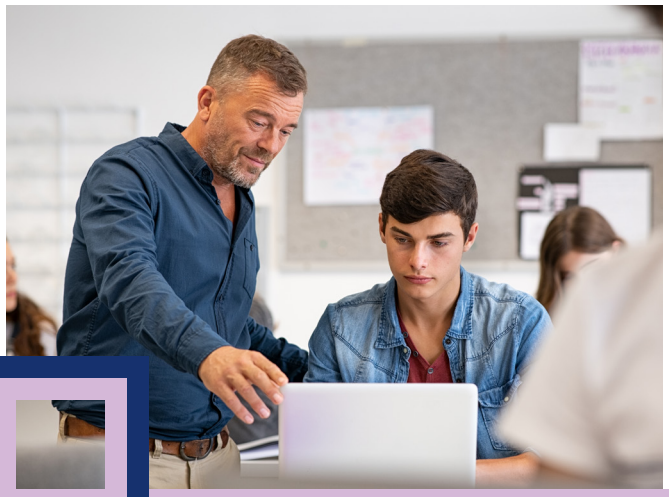
84%

of students feel neutral or satisfied about their experience with Affordable Access.

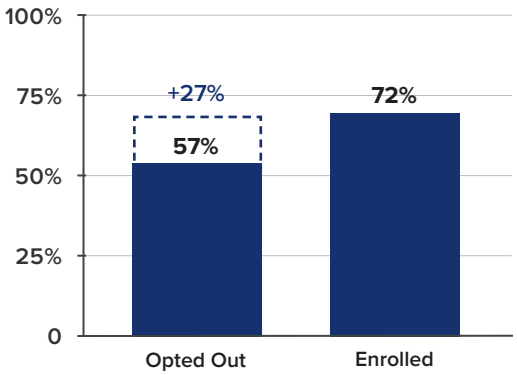
6 Opt-Out Models Expand Participation While Preserving Choice

Participation averages about 96% in opt-out models, compared with roughly 33% in opt-in.

Opt-out models preserve student choice: students may decline the materials, but access is automatically provided for all students by default day one of class.



Course Completion Rates Increase When Students Have Day-One Access to Course Materials



Total Student Population Who Opted Out vs. Enrolled in Affordable Access Programs

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