

# Exploring Faculty Perspectives on Text Selection and Textbook Affordability

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This paper reports the results of a pilot project conducted Spring 2021 in which Milner Library licensed seventy-five assigned texts to fifty-two courses at Illinois State University. The authors used the pilot as a springboard to explore faculty perspectives on textbook selection, textbook affordability, and the role of the academic library in addressing the rising cost of textbooks. The results highlight the strong and often deeply personal beliefs faculty hold about textbook selection and textbook affordability, reveal several obstacles to achieving affordable access to course readings, and demonstrate the willingness of some faculty to partner with librarians and other institutional stakeholders to explore more affordable access to assigned resources.

## Introduction

The exponential rise of textbook costs has been documented in the literature, both as an obstacle to student success and as an impetus for exploring models beyond the traditional textbook publishing system in which students purchase individual access to assigned texts. Students now have many options for accessing their assigned texts: they can rent, purchase, license, or illegally access them; or they can share them with classmates informally, via a cost-sharing agreement or a free program such as library reserves. They may access assigned texts via a campus-wide program that provides all assigned texts to students; for example, Inclusive Access or First Day, if their institution offers such a program and they do not opt out.<sup>1</sup> The 2019 novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has contributed to the complexity of text access options and their viability to various campus constituents. Digital access to assigned readings became a priority as many students were unable to return to their campus residences to retrieve their texts and other belongings after the onset of the pandemic and swiftly ensuing remediation actions, such as students returning to permanent residences and face-to-face classes pivoting to online delivery.

Like many other academic librarians, a group of five librarians across departments at Milner Library at Illinois State University (ISU) wanted to support student success and learn-

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ing during this unprecedented and challenging time. After discussing how the library might best measure its impact on student success, the authors developed a pilot program in which the library would license assigned texts so that enrolled students would not have to take on the cost of purchasing them. The group used \$10,000 that had originally been earmarked to support a new Open Educational Resources (OER) creation project but could not be advanced in the 2020–21 academic year. Instead, the money was used to license e-books for higher enrollment courses and incentivize participation in focus groups.

The authors used the survey and focus groups conducted as part of the spring 2021 pilot program as a springboard to discuss the multifaceted problem of textbook affordability and explore one potential solution. The conversations with faculty examined the benefits and challenges of using library-provided e-books in an undergraduate course, the potential impact of the pilot program on student success, faculty members' criteria and considerations in selecting texts for their courses, and opportunities for departments across campus—including the library—to collaborate in mitigating the high costs of textbooks. This study investigates the decisions faculty members make in selecting texts for their courses and the role of the academic library, as well as other campus units, in addressing problems surrounding textbook affordability. The objective of this study is to gather, present, and examine faculty perspectives on various aspects of textbook affordability so that academic librarians can be informed and work collaboratively to support the academic success of students and intellectual freedom of faculty in ways that are sustainable given local budgets and needs.

## **Literature Review**

Textbook affordability and student success are of vital interest to academic librarians, and the literature surrounding both topics is growing rapidly. Textbook affordability includes but is not limited to OER, and numerous studies investigate the impact of OER on student success and behaviors.<sup>2</sup> Penny Beile, Aimee deNoyelles, and John Raible, for example, found that significant savings could be realized without adversely impacting academic outcomes.<sup>3</sup> This finding is supported by Virginia Clinton and Shafiq Khan's meta-analysis of open textbook adoption studies, in which they reported no difference in student learning efficacy between open and commercial textbooks and found lower rates of course withdrawal for open textbooks.<sup>4</sup>

The 2019 novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic only intensified concerns around textbook affordability and student success and heightened the degree to which the two can be understood in relation to each other. Julie Murphy and Anne Shelley discussed potential solutions to the textbook affordability crisis before and during COVID-19 and provided several examples of programs and projects in place to remediate the financial strain on students related to rising textbook costs.<sup>5</sup> Despite various solutions available to faculty during the pandemic, however, a recent report indicated that 87 percent of faculty reported using the same text as in pre-pandemic semesters.<sup>6</sup> Through the process of conducting this pilot, the authors became aware of academic librarians supporting similar projects, some in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and others with longer standing. Louisiana State University Libraries' e-textbooks initiative provides access to course materials available for free through the libraries.<sup>7</sup> Florida State University Libraries offers a host of initiatives related to open and affordable textbooks.<sup>8</sup> Several other studies have investigated the impact of the academic library licensing assigned texts as e-books for students.<sup>9</sup> Many of these investigate the relative affordability, course integration, and usability of the texts. No identified studies have focused on the interaction of

textbook affordability with other criteria that teaching faculty must weigh in their selection of assigned course readings. The library vendor Ex Libris recently released a report exploring faculty and student perspectives on assigned course materials, but the emphasis is on “Managing, Accessing, and Using Course Materials,” not selecting them.<sup>10</sup> The report did yield relevant findings, however, especially that “faculty use other sources, such as web searches or recommendations from peers, more frequently than the academic library to find new course materials. Academic libraries can play a greater role in supporting faculty by ensuring that course resources are accessible, available to students at no or low cost, represent a diverse range of views and authors, and can be adapted to students’ needs.”<sup>11</sup>

Several ISU campus constituents have been engaged in investigating the issue of textbook affordability as it relates to student success, and a Milner Library faculty member has held membership on the Textbook Affordability Committee, a mixed external committee of the Academic Senate, since its inception. The Textbook Affordability Committee surveyed students (2019) and faculty (2020) to understand the extent to which textbook costs may be a problem for ISU students. The findings highlight disconnects and tensions between student and faculty perceptions surrounding assigned texts. Students expressed frustration related to access codes and feeling like faculty “did not use” required textbooks; 61 percent indicated they had to purchase an access code at an average estimated cost of \$120 per code and 69 percent reported purchasing required material that they said the professor did not use. Faculty responses related to access codes and “using the book” did not align with student perceptions: nearly two-thirds of faculty say they assigned 75–100 percent of a book, and of faculty who assign an access code (fewer than 25 percent), over half of them estimate the cost to students at \$50–100. With data supporting the assertion that the cost of textbooks is an obstacle for some ISU students, the authors launched a pilot project to work toward a potential solution and used the opportunity to dig deeper into faculty perspectives at the intersection of textbook selection and affordability.

## Research Questions

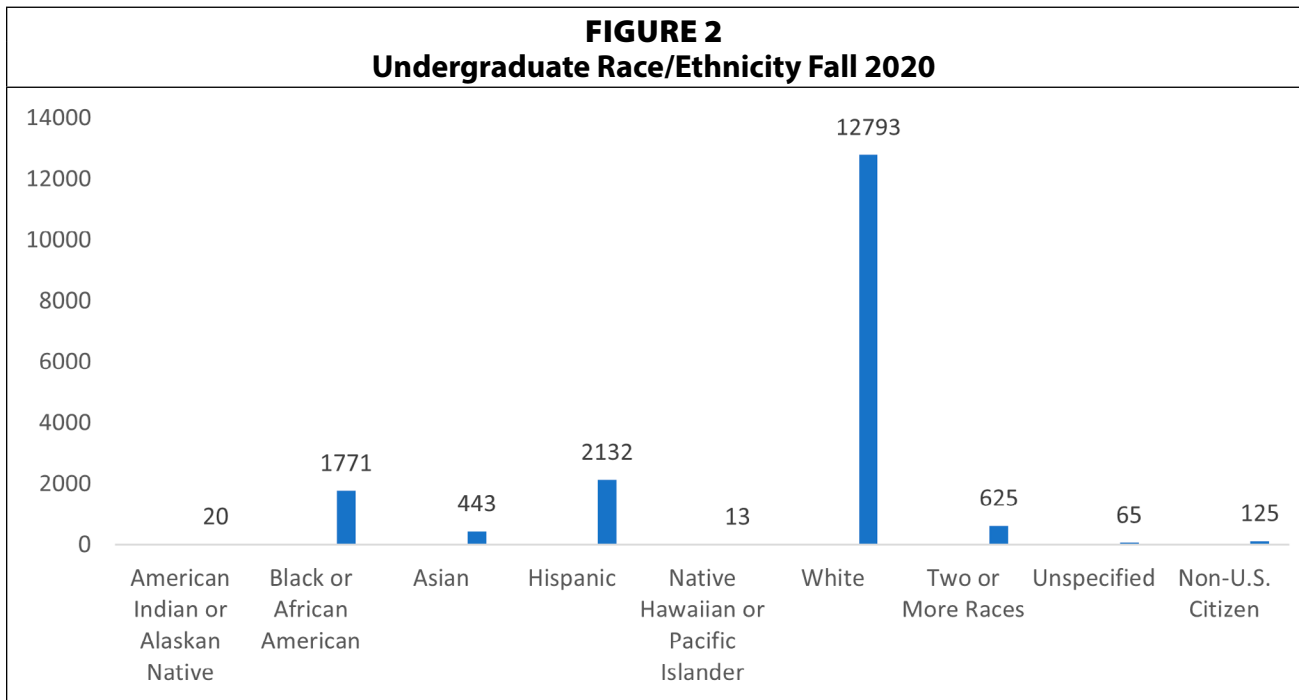
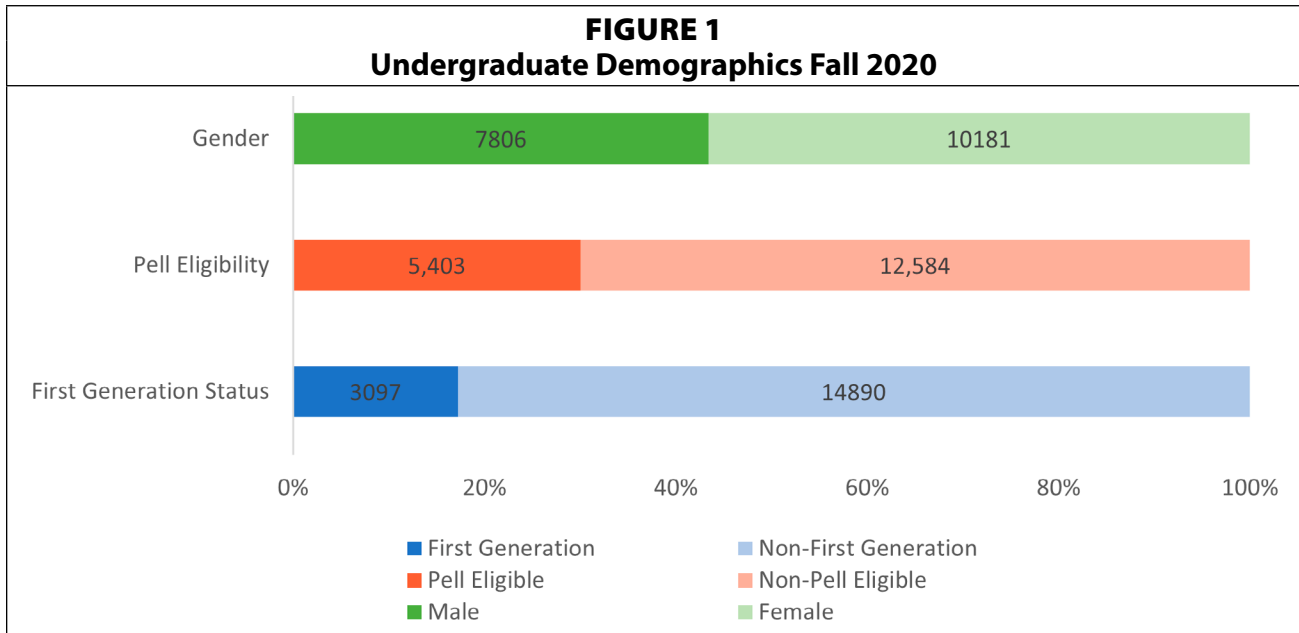
In this study, the authors seek to understand the decisions teaching faculty make surrounding text selection in undergraduate courses and how these decisions intersect with the increasing cost of textbooks and increasing awareness of textbook affordability as an equity issue. The authors articulated the following research questions:

1. How do faculty balance affordability, accessibility, copyright compliance, quality, and other factors when they select and assign texts?
2. What were the benefits and challenges of using library-provided e-book(s) in undergraduate classes?
3. How did having access to these e-books impact students’ experience and/or success?
4. Who on campus should be involved in advancing textbook affordability and, specifically, what role might the library play?

## Methods

ISU is a public, doctoral-granting institution with a spring 2021 total enrollment of 19,218 and a Carnegie classification of Doctoral Universities: Higher Research Activity. In fall 2020, the beginning of the academic year in which this study was conducted, ISU had a total undergraduate enrollment of 17,987, of which 5,403 were Pell Eligible and 3,097 identified as First

Generation.<sup>12</sup> As shown in figures 1 and 2, a majority of undergraduate students identified as female and indicated a racial/ethnic identification of white, followed by Hispanic, black or African American, two or more races, Asian, non-U.S. citizen, unspecified, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.<sup>13</sup> Of all ISU undergraduate students enrolled during Fall 2019, 4 percent formally registered disabilities with the office of disability services. The study was approved as exempt by the ISU Institutional Review Board. The complete survey and focus group instruments are provided in appendix 1.



**Participants and Procedure**

As proof of concept, the authors obtained the spring 2020 textbook list and searched for each of approximately 1,400 unique titles on the list in GOBI, Yankee Book Peddler’s online order-

ing platform. Titles were flagged with a color that indicated the type of institutional license available in GOBI. The team was primarily interested in e-books with unlimited user licenses. Depending on class size and other factors, however, EBSCO's concurrent access or ProQuest's nonlinear access, which allow simultaneous users but limit the total number of uses, were also considered. Around one third of the assigned textbooks were available for the library to license at an appropriate level of access. Once the spring 2021 textbook list was released, the team repeated this process.

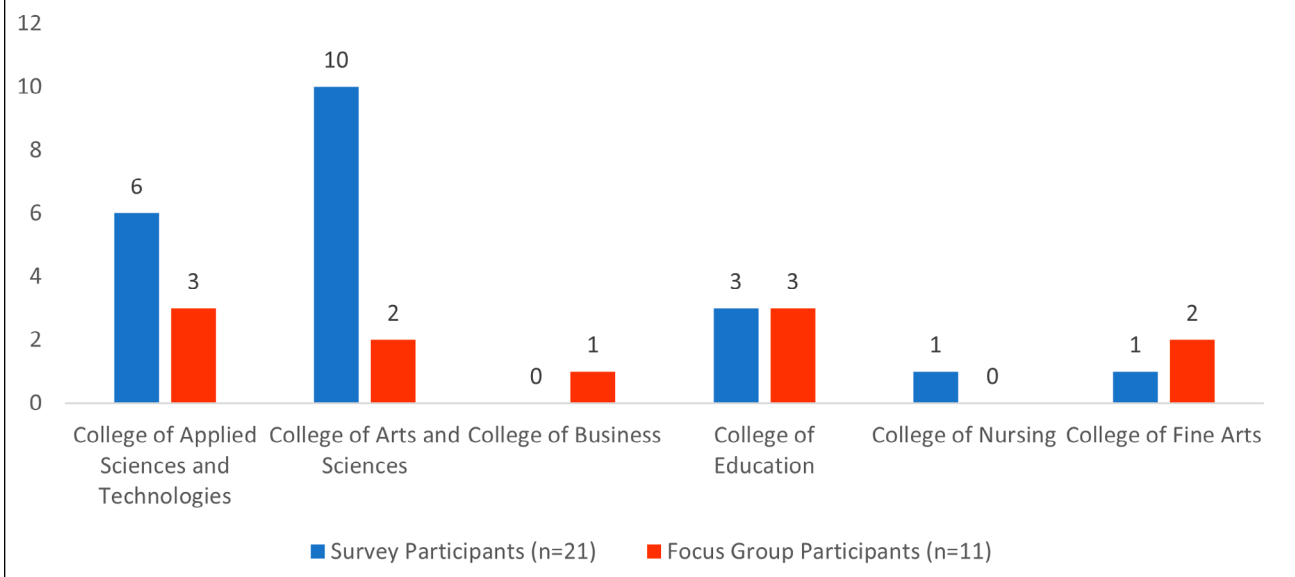
The team discussed various approaches to text selection and agreed to save the maximum amount of money for students. To that end, the authors calculated the amount of money students could potentially save based on predicted class enrollment and the cost of the textbook at the University's bookstore.<sup>14</sup> After calculating that cost/benefit ratio for each eligible class, the classes were ranked accordingly. In this process, the team discovered that Milner already had some of these texts as e-books; for those e-books that did not already have a suitable license for course use, the team upgraded the license directly with the vendor. Faculty in fifty-two out of ninety-two invited course sections chose to participate, but the majority—around 70 percent—of the purchased textbooks had at least one section of the course participating.

Throughout this paper, faculty is used exclusively for those who taught pilot project classes, irrespective of title or status. It was important that faculty be eager participants; faculty would need to notify their students that these free textbooks were available, faculty would be critical in encouraging students to participate in a focus group and complete the survey, and the authors wanted faculty input.<sup>15</sup> Given the short period of time between the release of the textbook list and the end of the semester, however, the team did not have the luxury of waiting for professors to respond to an invitation to participate in the research before purchasing the books. After the ebooks were activated, direct links to them were added to each course section's Sakai page, which is locally branded ReggieNet. In the end, 2,029 students were enrolled in participating sections, giving them the opportunity to save as much as \$143,880.

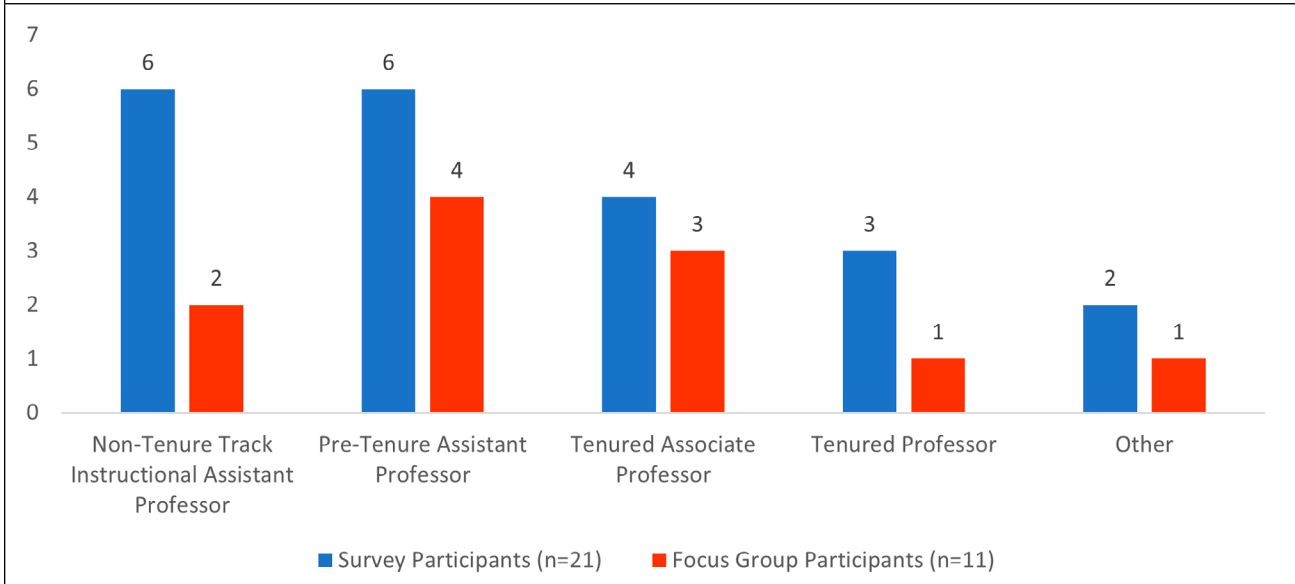
The survey was open for nine weeks and was completed by twenty three of fifty two faculty members for a participation rate of 40.4 percent. Unfortunately, two faculty members who completed the survey indicated that they were not outside of the European Economic Area, so their responses have been omitted from the quantitative analysis (n=21). Survey respondents represented all ISU colleges with the exception of the College of Business and accordingly offered a diverse array of academic disciplinary perspectives. Eleven faculty members representing all colleges except the Mennonite College of Nursing participated in one of two focus groups held on April 2, 2021, via Zoom. Any instructor of a course in the pilot program was eligible and invited to participate in the focus groups. As represented in figures 3 and 4 below, survey and focus group participants represented diverse social locations and years in teaching, including four tenure-track assistant professors, three tenured associate professors, two instructional assistant professors who are not tenure track, and one tenured full professor. These groups were facilitated by the associate dean for informational assets and lasted around one hour. The sessions were recorded, and the research team members consulted their own notes as well as the recordings and transcripts to conduct their analysis. The frequency, intensity, and tone of the statements were noted, which allowed the researchers to identify common themes across the focus groups.

John W. Creswell and Dana L. Miller discuss multiple frameworks through which to consider validity in qualitative research.<sup>16</sup> The authors employed several of these validity proce-

**FIGURE 3**  
Colleges Represented By Participants



**FIGURE 4**  
Title/Tenure Status Of Participants



dures, including triangulation, “where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study”; member checking, “taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account”; and thick, rich description, that is, “describe the setting, the participants, and the themes of a qualitative study in rich detail.”<sup>17</sup> The authors quoted focus group participants and survey respondents extensively to amplify their experiences and provide detailed context, invited focus group participants to provide feedback on the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the results, and shared manuscript drafts among library colleagues. The authors then incorporated feedback from multiple channels to enhance the validity and richness of the data.

## Results and Discussion

1. *What ideas do you have for balancing affordability, accessibility, copyright compliance, quality, and sustainability of assigned texts?* **“These are the authentic struggles that I want to share.”**

The survey and focus group instruments prompted faculty to reflect on how they decide which texts to assign. Although many respondents referred to cost, all alluded to quality or relevance of content. Many participants indicated that they try to find a balance between the two factors; one indicated that “we assigned this text after ordering a few options from Amazon and determining that this one is a best fit for our content while being at a price point that is good for our students.” Other important considerations include the intellectual accessibility of the content to students; one respondent typically asks themselves if the texts “address key content in an accessible way for students for a (at least somewhat) reasonable price?” Some indicated that they do not assign but rather recommend textbooks for students to purchase; one wrote: “Most of my assigned readings are accessed through websites or online articles.”

Those emphasizing quality over cost sometimes referred to relying on their professional networks to make assignments. One participant would “determine the best textbook in the respective area based on my teaching experience, the literature, and colleagues,” and another shared that “I find high-quality research-based books written by people in the field who I know and trust.” Related to the quality of materials, at least in certain fields, is the currency of the texts: “The most up-to-date material, with the most relevance and accessibility.” One participant noted that it is not enough for the book to be relevant; they also asked: “What is most needed related to the curriculum and how useful they might be to my students beyond just my class?” Some took the opportunity to highlight the intentional nature of textbook selection and the centrality of these texts to course design: “Textbooks are assigned for a reason. When they’re not read, it leaves a significant gap in student learning.”

For many participants, cost is a “major part of my decision-making process.” Several participants shared strategies for promoting affordability. Many participants indicated they have adopted a previous edition of a textbook if available, similar, and significantly less expensive. Some advocated for sharing textbooks with friends and classmates, a practice that participants had employed personally as students. Several participants indicated that they have put items on reserve in the library or lent personal copies to their students. One indicated that they are format and access model agnostic; they investigate the various ways to purchase, rent, or otherwise access a text and share this information with students. Other personal practices for promoting affordability include the following: “an inferior text ...because of costs”; “I typically only try to require one textbook per course to help keep costs down for students”; “I also rely on practitioner-friendly articles that are written by researchers”; “In the past, I have attempted to provide alternative assignments, photocopied sections of texts, or asked students to share materials”; and “I do use scanned book chapters and articles to supplement textbooks, and sometimes I have opted for a cheaper textbook because I could supplement the material with other book chapters or articles.” As one faculty member noted of such practices: “This is not ideal and makes it difficult to assess work that depends on consistent access to assigned materials.”

Some participants indicated that they find ways to get additional resources and non-essential readings to students for free. One technique that is aligned with this and also promotes diversity of perspectives is to incorporate readings from a variety of sources: “I try to put together a list that exposes students to diverse or creative perspectives on a period/topic.”

Several participants indicated that they do not want all their course readings to come through a single channel and affirmed the importance of promoting culturally diverse authors and perspectives in their syllabi. Unsurprisingly, not all approaches were compliant with copyright. One participant asked why everything should not be considered fair use, and another admitted to emailing content directly to students who had not purchased it. For this participant, having materials provided via the pilot project was a relief; they exclaimed: "I'm not breaking any laws!" Another participant remarked mischievously that they could neither confirm nor deny whether they had ever suggested to a student: "definitely don't search [title] .pdf."

Participants shared a variety of concerns and considerations in the text adoption process unrelated to quality and cost. Several acknowledged departmental requirements or pressure regarding textbook assignments, especially in the case of texts authored by departmental colleagues. A few participants also spoke to the aspect of inertia in textbook assignments: once a book is selected, you stick with it. A few participants spoke to the challenges of redoing a course in the wake of a new textbook adoption. One faculty member spoke to the struggle of balancing issues of text quality and affordability with their own labor as a pre-tenure faculty member. Noting that some texts and software programs would truly benefit students, and that these titles may not be affordable, the participant admitted to feeling terribly conflicted: "if it [the textbook] is very different, you know, I'm pre-tenure, I have to do a new [course] prep ... so these are the authentic struggles that I want to share."

Accessibility was not mentioned as a consideration by participants until prompted by the focus group facilitator, after which participants discussed student technology and internet access. One participant thought that ISU had done an excellent job of providing laptops at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has promoted enhanced accessibility to online resources. Another participant pushed back against the suggestion of limited accessibility of electronic resources via internet access for their students because of the prevalence of smart phones: "If a student can't afford a computer, they can't afford a print textbook." One participant noted that digital resources have some tools that are useful for students with visual impairments, specifically noting audio books.

COVID-19 influenced the decisions some faculty made about text selection and assignment. One participant indicated that the decision is typically driven by the quality of text; however, "during the COVID pandemic, price of textbook became the most important factor. I eliminated texts in courses where I could, and where there were not low-cost text options." Another participant indicated that although their decisions had previously focused on the needs of the course and not digital availability of the text, "That might change if there are more e-book versions of textbooks available."

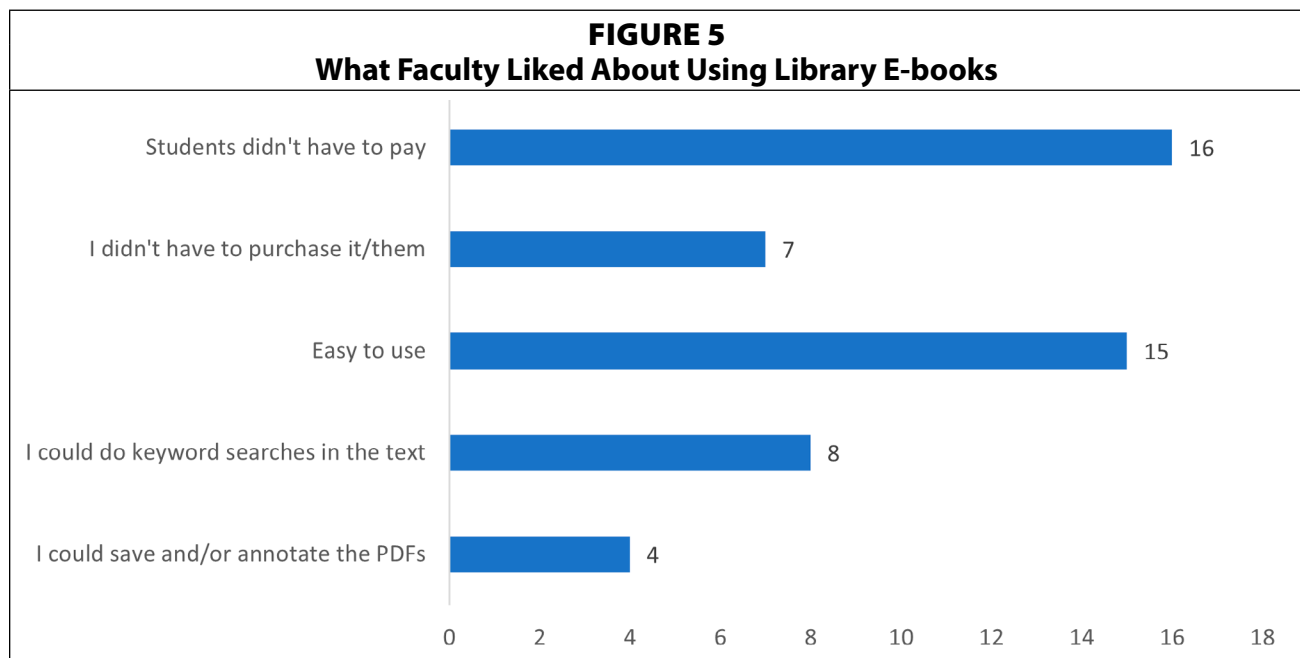
Participants in both focus groups mentioned that one idea to balance affordability, copyright compliance, quality, and sustainability of assigned texts was the investment in OER. Specifically, one participant in each of the two focus groups mentioned the Kansas State University Open Textbook program and spoke to some of the advantages of leveraging institutional systems and faculty expertise to support a similar OER program.<sup>18</sup> The topic of OER adoption, however, sparked debate within and even after one focus group. One faculty participant stated that the quality of research was their most important consideration, and their touchstone was "do I personally know and trust the author?" This participant conceded that this meant affordability was less of a concern to them personally. Another participant in that group indicated that the assertion that there were only a few experts who could write a



textbook prompt underlying questions about trust and authority in text selection and adoption of OER and/or other affordable resources. Certain disciplines—and arguably higher education itself—are hierarchical in their structures and conduct gatekeeping around authority and expertise. These processes might serve as a barrier to faculty adoption of more open, affordable, and equitable resources.

2. *What were the benefits and challenges of using library-provided e-book(s) in undergraduate classes?*  
**“[I can] treat every student the same.”**

Faculty shared what they liked about using the provided e-books as well as the challenges they encountered in using them. As shown in figure 5, most appreciated that they were free to students and easy to use, and some appreciated the digital features of the e-books.



Participants identified several benefits of the library’s e-book pilot program; most notably, the program allowed participants to “treat every student the same.” Many participants were pleased that they did not have to worry about whether or if their students could afford to purchase the text, and they appreciated that it was one less concern for their students during a time of heightened stress and anxiety. One participant shared that they would typically have to have at least one difficult discussion in which they asked a student, “Do you have the textbook?” Knowing that all students had access to the assigned text supported a more equitable class dynamic.

Most participants appreciated how the project minimized the financial burden on their students. Several participants provided additional information about why and how students decide to delay or not acquire assigned texts. One participant noted that many of their students live paycheck to paycheck, and that they frequently wait for a check to purchase assigned texts. One participant said of the timing of the program: “It was truly a godsend,” and explained that some of their students are Dreamers [DACA] who had become breadwinners for undocumented family members during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several participants emphasized that students

have challenging decisions to make about how to use their limited funds and appreciated that they did not have to spend the money on the texts that they could be spending on rent, groceries, utilities, medical care, or other necessities. One participant whose research and instruction focuses on literacy stated that about half of their students opted to purchase the assigned text in a print format but indicated that the pilot program was a great option for students who could not afford to do so. Many participants expressed relief that their students did not have to worry about this aspect of the student experience in a particularly fraught spring 2021 semester.

Participants highlighted several elements that enhanced their teaching. One participant mentioned the benefit of easily referring to the book during class and knowing that everyone would literally be on same page.<sup>19</sup> Another participant shared that they were able to assign reading quizzes from the outset of the semester and did not have to wait for books to arrive as they typically do. Participants appreciated the convenience of the e-book format, such as the capability of searching for keywords throughout the text and the ease of linking to and providing access to the e-books. Several participants agreed that the capability of linking to or embedding the e-book in their ReggieNet course shell was a great benefit of the program. One stated, "It has made my teaching a lot easier—I am able to access the book from anywhere (if I'd like to brush up on the chapter reading), and I also know that all students have access to the reading." Another shared, "That I can directly link to course readings from my ReggieNet sites makes the organization of courses much easier, especially in online or hybrid settings as we've been in this past year."

Several participants indicated that when the texts are not provided, they frequently hear excuses about why students do not have a required text, and they frequently encounter students who do not have the book in time to complete assignments or participate in discussions. Faculty noted that because the texts were free to their students, they did not feel compelled to offer justifications for their selection of a particular title, its cost, or their use of only a portion of it. A few participants shared that there are some titles that they prefer to use as references, and not assign "cover to cover." When such a text is expensive, however, they have hesitations around doing so. The pilot program reduced obstacles surrounding resource needs and facilitated faculty use of materials in ways that support their academic freedom in building their courses.

Several of the participants mentioned benefits of the program that were related to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the pilot took place. Most noted that remote access to the book was a huge benefit during this time of unprecedented online learning. Several indicated that the program was particularly helpful because many students did not live on campus or even in the geographic vicinity and accordingly did not have access to print reserves or other campus services; for example: "One of the largest benefits of having an e-book option is that students can access the textbooks from anywhere. This was a huge help when we made the transition from in person to online teaching in spring 2020. Many students left their hard copies of the textbook in their dorm rooms." One participant suggested that the pilot program helped diminish the substantial carbon footprint of packaging and shipping textbooks via Amazon or other providers, which had seen considerable growth during the pandemic. Others similarly appreciated the ways in which this program might support aspects of environmental sustainability by reducing paper waste.

Faculty members articulated a few concerns regarding how the pilot intersected with their selection of texts. Some participants suggested that they select texts with the intention that some should travel with the student into their professional life. Their specific concerns

were that the students would only have access to the texts licensed via the pilot project during their time as ISU students. One faculty member noted that they assigned some texts because they felt their students could use them in graduate school. Multiple participants also emphasized complexities surrounding texts assigned through departmental selection or approval processes.<sup>20</sup> If books must be selected or adopted by a departmental committee, it is less likely that some required texts would be available for libraries to license.

Fortunately, faculty reported minimal challenges with the e-books themselves; a few shared that they could not download or annotate the text as desired or indicated that they were otherwise difficult to use or access. One survey respondent relayed a challenge regarding the timing: "Students would buy the physical textbook before they were informed there was an e-book." Only two participants spoke to access problems. One mentioned a potential license limitation, namely that students reported being unable to use a text when others were viewing it; this participant also indicated that it might have been an operator error. Another stated that their students infrequently reported that the URL did not work, but these problems were resolved easily by trying again. One participant shared that they initially had some concerns about teaching from an e-book, but found that although there was a learning curve, it was not insurmountable. Another participant pointed out that some digital texts do not have page numbers to which one can refer, and that they cannot be flipped through like a physical book, indicating, "scrolling is not the same." One participant added that they had extensively annotated the assigned text and previously used a document camera to show these during class sessions; they acknowledged that this practice would have had to have been reconsidered during the pandemic. A few participants agreed that reading and teaching from e-books can present challenges because it is harder to tune out digital distractions.

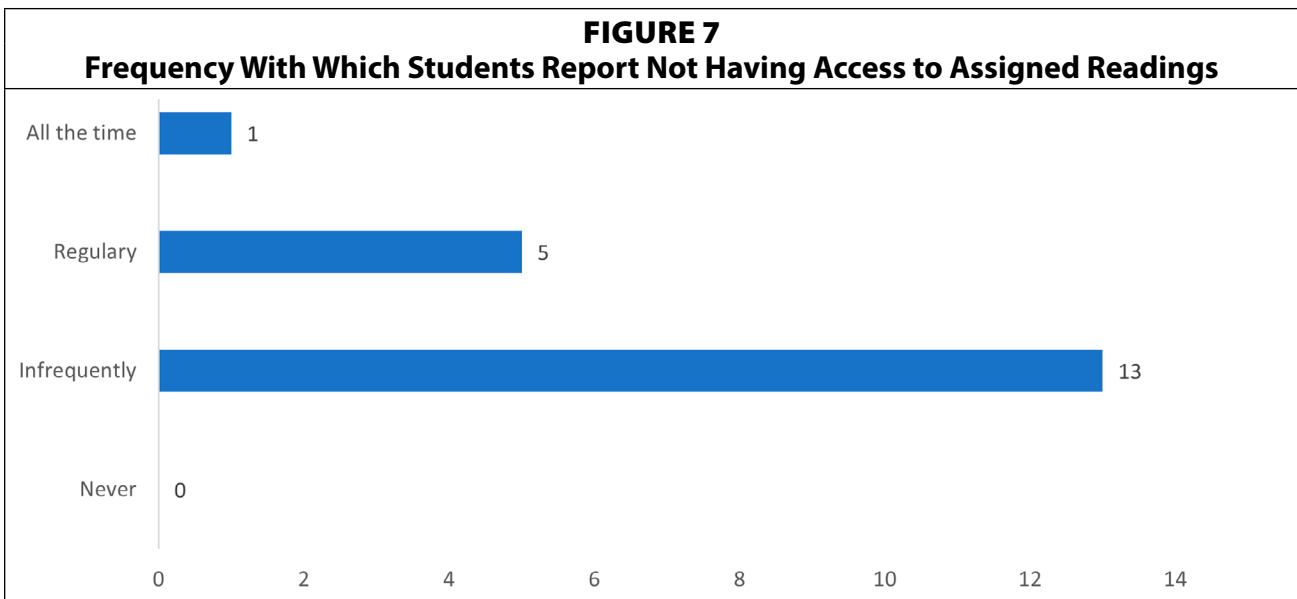
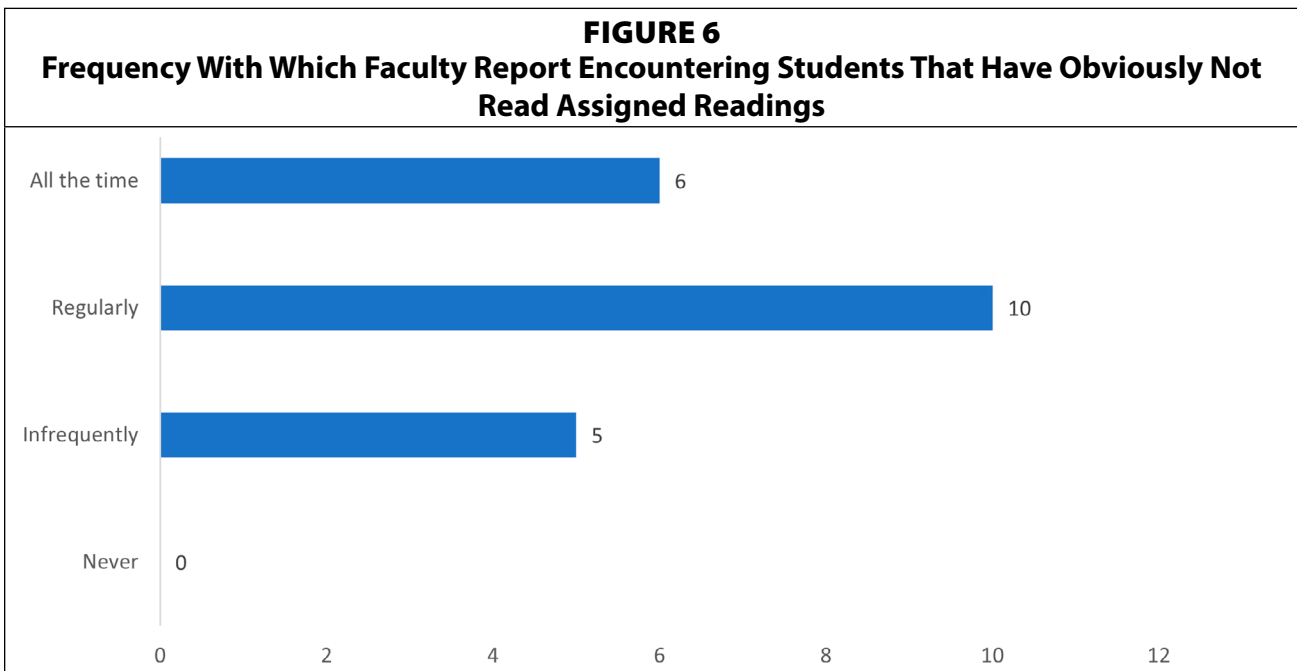
Most other potential problems were noted by only one participant each. One asked how this might work for courses not in ReggieNet. All of the spring 2021 pilot courses had a ReggieNet course shell, and this is increasingly an expectation, if not a departmental requirement, at ISU. The library's access services department has added proxied URLs to licensed content in courses in ReggieNet for many years, and the infrastructure is well established. Another participant mentioned that only one of the two books assigned in their course was part of the pilot project, which was a source of some confusion for students. One participant reiterated that even providing free texts would not guarantee that students would read them; you can only lead a horse to water, after all. The most troubling concern, only articulated by one participant, was that a student had plagiarized from the provided e-book; the digital format does facilitate copying and pasting into a digital document.<sup>21</sup>

The primary concern articulated by participants related to the digital nature of the assigned e-books. Many bemoaned the additional screen time during the COVID-19 pandemic. A secondary concern, though no less vigorously articulated, related to concerns about the nature of reading from screens and the implications of reading from a screen on reading comprehension. One participant lent their expertise in literacy to discuss how text format, and print versus digital specifically, intersects with various kinds of reading. This participant and another participant in a different focus group shared concerns that although digital platforms may be sufficient for superficial reading—research shows little difference from print to screen in this respect—the literature suggests that students are less successful at reading deeply and for comprehension in online platforms.<sup>22</sup> The focus group facilitator asked if participants had evidence that their students printed e-book chapters during the pilot project and participants

confirmed that they did not, though a few suggested that their students print out research articles. Concerns regarding reading comprehension may contribute to the long-term viability of this pilot or other projects that promote adoption of digital texts among individual faculty or even among certain disciplines or teaching units.

3. How did having access to the textbook impact students' experience and/or success? **"This is about equity!"**

By asking how common it is for students not to have read for class and how frequently students report not having access to assigned readings, the authors investigated the connection between the library-provided e-books and student preparation and success and established a baseline of student preparation and access to assigned materials prior to the pilot project. As indicated in figures 6 and 7, lack of preparation is not uncommon, though students less commonly report lack of access to faculty.



When asked if students seemed more prepared for assignments using these e-books than other texts, ten selected unknown and eight indicated that students did seem more prepared when using the library-assigned text. Only three selected “no,” answering definitively that students were no more prepared when using the library-provided e-books. Most respondents replied with some variation of “It is hard to tell under these circumstances” to the question “Did access to the provided e-book(s) impact the grades or retention of any students in your course?” Several, however, indicated that the ease of access and use, convenience, personal (and not shared) access, timing, and cost savings likely had a positive impact, even if it was marginal.

Many of these comments evoked COVID-19: “I have found challenges with student learning, but I believe that is more so due to the pandemic circumstances and students being poorer online learners than anything else.” The intersection of stress, new learning modalities, and unprecedented circumstances made the pilot project especially welcome: “Given all of the outside-of-class stressors my students are dealing with regarding their own and their families’ health and financial security, saving them some costs in this way seems wonderful” and “I think this was an especially tough semester financially for many students, and the option of free access was extraordinarily welcome.” Some compared use to other assigned readings: “I think that providing the e-book to students encouraged students to actually view the book. There is another book that I asked students to purchase for my class, and many did not and struggle with questions related to that portion of the class,” Others spoke to the availability of the e-books from the outset: “provides instant access to students. In the past, students had to wait for a few weeks for the books to arrive.”

Several respondents emphasized the connections between free access and assignment completion. One remarked cheekily: “The students were relieved that the books were available with no cost and no effort. I found that students actually read the texts which was a pleasant surprise.” Another suggested that “although students did not necessarily do reading for individual classes more regularly, I think that access to e-books made a significant difference in completing writing assignments. Students reported that the keyword search function got them started on work and helped them to better provide specific citations in their writing. The improvement in citation practice is an immediate and obvious benefit.” A few others noted that some of their students had purchased a physical copy, or that the e-book was a supplementary reading, and the library-provided e-book did not equally impact all students enrolled. One participant highlighted concerns about reading comprehension and digital texts, noting: “I think that students read more deeply and better understand the text when they read print versions. However, I do think that provided e-books are much easier on students’ wallets and in that sense are a bit more equitable.”

Faculty expressed enthusiasm that the portability of the assigned e-books allowed students to engage and participate right off the bat. One participant noted that students “could pull it up on their phone and participate in discussion, even if they hadn’t done the reading in advance.” Other participants emphasized that having the book from the outset of the course was beneficial and may have contributed to students’ confidence. One participant was pleased that this semester their students were able to “get it from the first assignment,” where typically it takes longer for all students to have the materials they need to make sense of the assignments and complex theoretical work. They attributed this to the psychology of having the needed resources from the outset, which removed anxieties for students and faculty alike.

Many participants agreed that the pilot project enhanced the opportunity for student learning by removing one potential obstacle during an exceedingly stressful time. Several participants indicated that it was a relief to them to know all students have access. Their ability to use the e-books in class was a benefit and something that enhanced the learning environment. Participants in both focus groups indicated that the pilot project created a “no excuses” environment in which all students had access to the assigned text; this meant that students did not have to offer excuses and faculty had reassurance that student learning or engagement issues were not driven by a lack of access. Some faculty noted that the portability and accessibility of the e-books allowed the students to work and read on their own schedule and “didn’t have to work within the library’s hours.”

When asked what they wanted librarians to know about textbook affordability and how it has impacted student learning, many respondents expressed concerns about equity for those students who do not have access to assigned readings: “This is about equity!” One noted: “It plays a major role for low income students, and I have had students email me about lower cost options for textbooks and who sometimes get behind in a course because they can’t afford the textbook.” One respondent indicated that in previous semesters the lack of access to texts had had a negative impact on writing assignments: “In the past, I have had students who didn’t purchase books or who attempted to find inconvenient workarounds. This has often most harmed students who are unable to complete writing assignments because they do not have access to the text required to do so.”

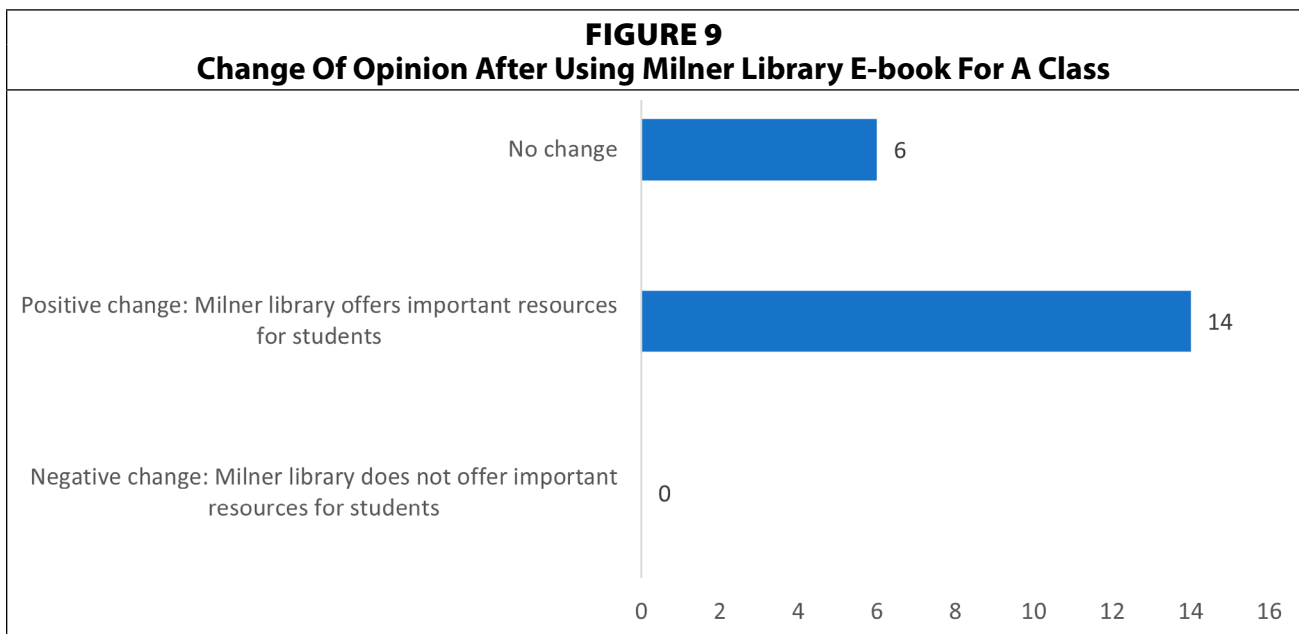
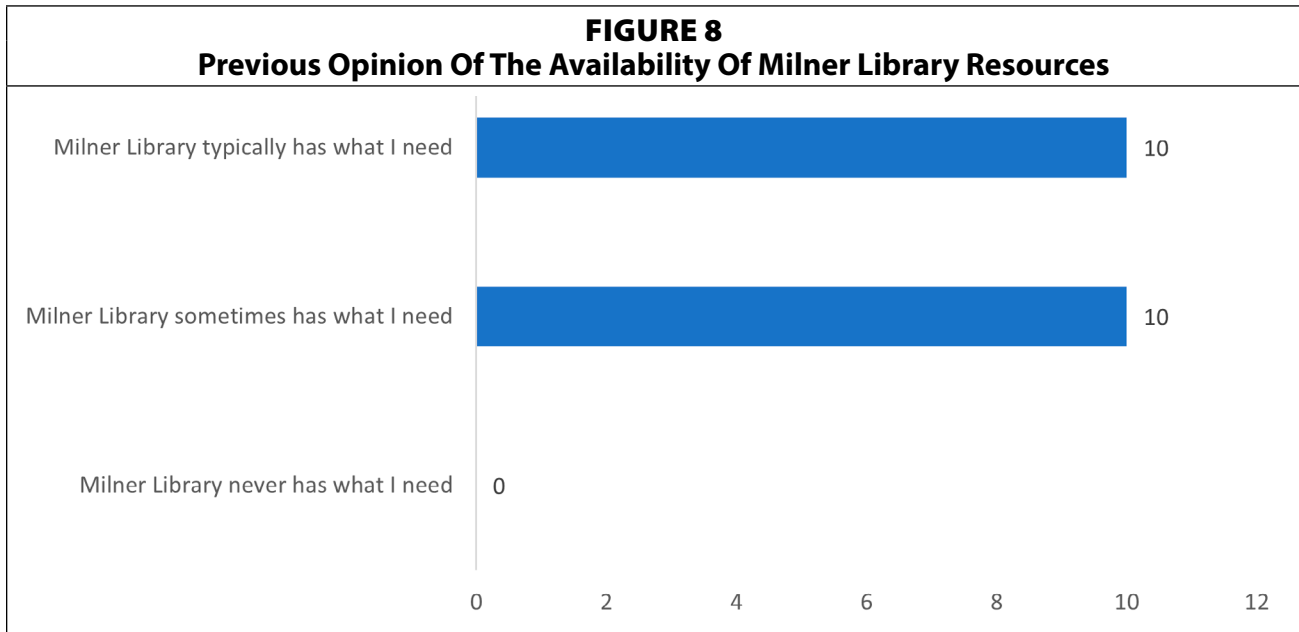
There was consensus among participants that it was challenging to compare student performance to previous semesters. In spring 2021, the University was still in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and the semester was far from normal. Some participants noted that with no “real” spring break, students and faculty were exhausted and their motivation was lagging. Participants agreed that it would be impossible to attribute any positive or negative outcomes definitively to this pilot project because of all the changes that the pandemic brought to the learning experience. Some faculty expressed concern that using the assigned e-books added to the students’ already extensive screen time, which of course was heightened during COVID-19. Although participants could not offer definitive evidence that the pilot contributed to student success, there was consensus that the pilot benefited their teaching and student learning in several ways, and created a more equitable environment in which students had access to the needed resources from the beginning of the semester.

*4. Who on campus should be involved in advancing textbook affordability and, specifically, what role might the library play? “I see centrally accessible textbooks like this as contributing to that process as well—this seems like a wise use of our university funds/tuition dollars.”*

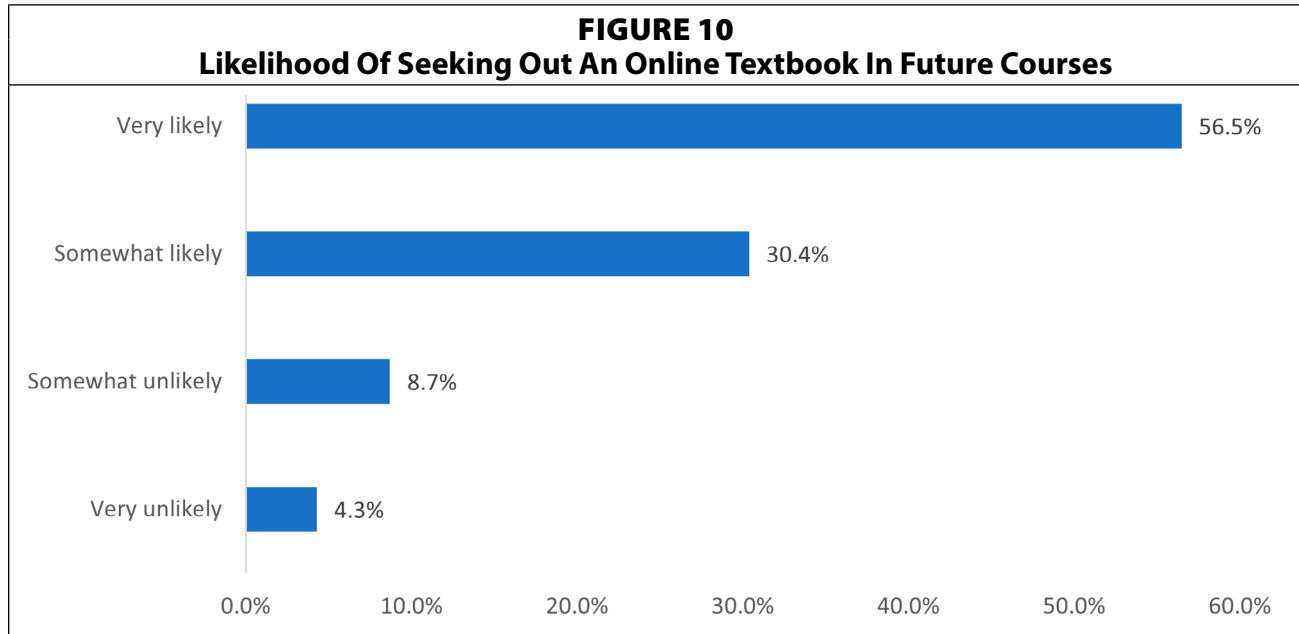
Study participants identified a variety of campus committees and units who might be important collaborators. The President’s Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Council was the first mentioned, and participants also mentioned the Multicultural Center, which might help faculty members go beyond the canon and ensure that texts and authors are more diverse and inclusive. Student Access and Accommodation Services, as well as the AVP for Student Success and AVP for Enrollment Services, were also evoked in the recognition that textbook affordability has implications for student retention and success. Participants noted that department-level committees that provide input on text adoption should also play a role, as should administrators and committees involved in promotion and tenure,

as they are most directly involved in valuing textbook affordability as a consideration in those decisions. Participants recognized textbook affordability as an equity issue—one provocatively suggesting “going full Bernie Sanders”—and an issue with implications for student and faculty success, traditional textbook publishing, curriculum design, and library operations.

In order to establish future directions for advancing textbook affordability at ISU, the authors asked survey respondents for their opinions on the general availability of library resources before and after participating in the pilot. Participants reported a positive change in their impressions of the availability of library resources (see figures 8 and 9).



Almost 87 percent of respondents indicated that they would be very likely or somewhat likely to seek a library-licensed text for use in their future courses; fewer than 5 percent indicated that they would be very unlikely to do so (see figure 10). A majority of survey participants (thirteen) indicated that they had not previously used an e-book provided by Milner Library, and eight indicated that they had. At the very least, the study introduced some ISU faculty to affordable resources that could be integrated into their instruction.



Faculty descriptions of why they would seek out library-provided e-books provided some additional information on the perceived value of this pilot project. Most responses indicated interest in the library continuing this or a similar project that would provide access to assigned materials. Cost and convenient access were the primary reasons cited, though the pandemic also factored into some responses, for example, “I want to be able to save students money, because texts are excessively expensive. I always try to place a copy of the text on reserve, although that has been a challenge during COVID.” Other faculty revealed that the library had not been a consideration when assigning a text: “I was unaware of Milner’s e-book offerings for textbooks and that wasn’t what I considered when I selected a textbook. I do pay attention to cost when I select a book, but the main factor is the quality of the textbook, if I like a book and I think it fits the course, cost is secondary.” One respondent asserted the importance of quality and authorship over format, noting: “I will absolutely not use a textbook simply because it is available via e-book. I care much more about the content and authors of the texts, so that will always be my main priority.”

Some respondents highlighted differences in textbook assignments for upper-level versus lower-level courses. One shared that “I much prefer to use resources that my students can freely access or have already paid for. In many of my (especially upper-level courses) this is in the form of peer-reviewed research articles. If I could switch out textbooks for some of my freshman-sophomore level courses (or upper-class courses as well) that would be wonderful” and another added, “Since I only ‘recommend’ textbooks for my undergraduate classes, I like the idea of e-books that are likely cheaper or free through the library. I hate having students



spend so much money on a textbook that they may not need in the future. At the graduate level, I am more likely to require textbooks that will support their future professional practice." These responses suggest, perhaps, that faculty see a larger role for the library in providing access to texts for graduate-level classes.

To the question of how Milner Library could support faculty in textbook affordability efforts, the first and most enthusiastic response to this question was: "Keep this program forever! Can we please continue this?" One participant immediately followed up by stating that it would be great to have an option for this or something similar to continue. This participant articulated a plan by which students could pay a discounted rate for their texts and the library would acquire titles and manage their access. Other participants expressed interest in exploring similar models, and one shared that they have used electronic reserves and wondered if that program might be expanded to handle the additional need. Most participants expressed their gratitude for the pilot program and indicated that they were pleased that the library is thinking through issues related to textbook affordability. "Students who can't access these resources are at a serious disadvantage, and finances seem like one of the top reasons students leave our college [...] I see centrally accessible textbooks like this as contributing to that process as well—this seems like a wise use of our university funds/tuition dollars."

Several expressed a desire for partnership with the library, be it through providing print or electronic reserves, identifying potential texts, or acquiring texts. One participant said that "it would be nice if I could receive a list of e-books for my discipline or even just information on available publishers or how to browse e-book in my discipline." Some participants indicated that they would welcome more communication from the library on opportunities to help minimize the costs students pay for assigned texts. One spoke to the importance of library resource integration in the LMS: "I also wonder if there is a way to embed e-chapters into ReggieNet for weekly lessons/modules. This is going to be even more convenient for students to just click a link on the certain page in ReggieNet for that week." Some also indicated that they would also welcome any data related to textbook affordability: "For a long-term impact purpose, it might be helpful to track and calculate how much e-textbook program can help students save."

A few expressed an interest in library assistance related to identifying OER content that could be integrated in their course, or in highlighting diverse perspectives to improve their syllabus. One participant suggested that ISU could do more in-house to support textbook affordability than a for-profit publisher "Taking the profit motive out should realize some savings." Two participants expressed interest in the library supporting OER more directly, as in the Kansas State University example shared (see above), and in helping to normalize OER and open access (OA) on campus. One participant stated that "I've been using research articles [in upper-level courses,] because students have already paid for [this content] like five times," that is, through tax dollars, tuition, faculty salaries, library subscriptions, uncompensated peer-review and editorial work, etc. That participant also expressed the hope that OA publishing would take off both within their discipline and at ISU, and expressed interest in information on OA publishing and OER creation and availability.

The conversation strayed beyond the immediate institutional context to include conversations about textbook publishing more broadly. Several expressed their disappointment with current textbook publishing models and the costs students bear: "Textbooks are too expensive, and they go out-of-date quickly with new editions published every few years. I do not like

requiring students to purchase expensive textbooks unless I know it will support their later clinical practice after graduation.” One shared a concern regarding access to digital textbooks after the course: “When students are only paying for limited access to a textbook it is not as useful, that is one of the things I do like about e-book access through Milner, students can go back to the material later.” One participant indicated that at a previous institution, they had used an auto-enroll textbook program in which students paid a fee and had discounted access to all required course materials. Several participants noted problems with existing models for textbook acquisition, indicating that rental models did not work out well in practice, and that the bookstore was engaged in “gouging.”

One focus group participant suggested that professional organizations were well positioned to facilitate the creation of quality OER textbooks, and another participant suggested that professional organizations were getting out of textbook publishing. Another point/counterpoint was offered when one participant indicated that they had neither the desire nor comprehensive expertise to write their own course textbook and did not know of any institutional colleagues who could satisfactorily write a textbook on a specified topic. A participant in the same focus group countered that not all expertise would need to be local; they pointed out that faculty at other institutions are being funded to write OER that could be locally adopted. Although the authors sought to investigate who on campus should be involved in the complex issue of textbook affordability, faculty input broadened the context from local solutions to broader networks of participation. Faculty suggested several opportunities for the library to play a role in mitigating the burden of rising textbook costs, and many study participants learned that the library has the resources and desire to do this work.

### **Limitations**

The impetus for this research was a pilot project conducted to address the issue of textbook affordability on a specific university campus. The pilot project began after faculty had selected texts and participants were invited only if assigned text for their courses were available for the library to license. Accordingly, the environment was not tightly controlled, and the results are not generalizable. The data do not allow for an investigation of how or if format factors into textbook selection decisions and further research is needed to explore this consideration. Although the survey response rate of 40 percent is strong, there was nonetheless a small number of study participants, and the sample of disciplines was not necessarily representative. The authors also acknowledge the likelihood of selection bias; those professors who chose to participate are likely interested in this issue, or at least willing to consider potential solutions to the perceived problem of textbook affordability. Despite their interest in this issue, however, some faculty participants nonetheless expressed significant concerns about the proposed solution of library-licensed e-books.

### **Conclusion**

The results from this study fill a gap in the library literature about faculty considerations in the text selection process as well as about their awareness of textbook affordability concerns and how those inform their willingness to partner with academic librarians to provide access to affordable texts. This study also provides useful context surrounding the broader experience of textbook selection in higher education and the deeply held and often conflicting beliefs that surface when discussing the intersection of textbook affordability and

intellectual freedom. By providing faculty space to discuss their practices and experiences related to textbook selection and assignment, the authors gained insight into their expectations and needs.

Results highlight the complexity of textbook affordability and the current landscape of textbook access options. This study confirms previously cited findings concerning the obstacles to student success posed by the increasing cost of textbook access; these challenges can serve to increase awareness of disparities in access, wealth, and achievement. Of particular note to librarians, the findings indicate that some faculty are willing to collaborate with academic librarians to address textbook affordability, and welcome opportunities to learn more about resources available to them locally. Librarians can contribute to textbook affordability programs by strategically marketing relevant resources and services not only to faculty, but to stakeholders across campus. Librarians will vary in the support that they can offer throughout the text selection and provision processes; the financial resources, staffing, administrative considerations, and faculty and student needs and expectations will demand that textbook affordability initiatives must be specific to the institution. In sharing this research, the authors aim to encourage academic librarians to collaborate strategically and broadly to support textbook affordability.

### **Acknowledgments**

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## Appendix 1. Faculty Survey and Focus Group Instruments

### Faculty Survey Questions

1. I am willing to participate in this study (y/n)
2. I am 18 or older (y/n)
3. I am currently physically located outside of the European Economic Area (y/n)
4. Have you previously used Milner Library e-books? (y/n)
5. What did you like about using library e-books? (choose all that apply) Students didn't have to pay
  - I didn't have to purchase them
  - Easy to use
  - I found related materials in the library databases
  - I could do keyword searches in the text
  - I could save and/or annotate the PDFs
  - Other, please explain:
6. What challenges did you encounter in using the e-book(s)? (choose all that apply)
  - Difficult to use (timeout problems, navigation problems, etc.)
  - Difficult to access (login problems, didn't work with screen reader, etc.)
  - I couldn't download or annotate the text as desired
  - Other, please explain:
7. How do you decide which texts to assign?
8. How frequently do you encounter students that have obviously not read assigned readings?
  - All the time
  - Regularly
  - Infrequently
  - Never
9. How frequently do students report not having access to assigned readings?
  - All the time
  - Regularly
  - Infrequently
  - Never
10. Comparing assigned readings from the library provided e-book(s) to other assignments: Were the students more prepared for assignments from the e-books than other texts?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Unknown
11. Do you think that access to the provided e-book(s) impacted the grades or retention of any students in your course? Please explain:
12. If you had previously used Milner Library resources, what was your general opinion of their availability?
  - Milner Library typically has what I need
  - Milner Library sometimes has what I need
  - Milner Library never has what I need

13. Now that you've used a Milner Library e-book for your class, how has this opinion changed?
  - No change
  - Positive change: Milner Library offers important resources for students
  - Negative change: Milner Library does not offer important resources for students
14. How likely are you to seek out an online textbook like the one used in this course for future courses? Why?
  - Very likely
  - Somewhat likely
  - Somewhat unlikely
  - Very unlikely
15. What information would you like to share with librarians about textbook affordability and how it has impacted your teaching?
16. What information would you like to share with librarians about textbook affordability and how it has impacted your students' learning?
17. What is your title (if multiple, list both)?
18. What is your department?
19. What is your college?
20. Please enter the course number(s) for the class(es) in which you have a library-provided e-book (for example, AGR 203, BUS 100, COM 101)
21. Approximately how much did the other textbook(s) for this/these course[s] cost?

### Faculty Focus Group Questions

1. What were the benefits of having the library provide access to your assigned text(s)?
2. What frustrations did you and your students encounter in using the e-book(s)?
3. In what way(s) did having access to the textbook affect students' experience and/or performance in your course?
4. What ideas do you have for balancing affordability, accessibility, copyright compliance, quality, and sustainability of assigned texts?
5. What ideas do you have for advancing textbook affordability at ISU? Who on campus should be involved?
6. How would you like Milner Library to support you in textbook affordability efforts?

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### Notes

1. First Day®/Inclusive Access is a Barnes and Noble program by which "the cost of course materials is added as a charge for the course, by your school, and students receive benefits including deeply discounted, lowest price materials; the guaranteed right materials; access on or before the first day of class." Accessed July 2, 2021, <https://customercare.bncollege.com/hc/en-us/articles/360001654487-What-is-First-Day-Inclusive-Accessed>.

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