

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Fall 2019, nearly 2,000 Tennessee community college students participated in the first Tennessee Community College Student Course Materials Survey. The survey was conducted by a doctoral student at The University of Tennessee Knoxville with support from the Postsecondary Education Research Center, the Tennessee Board of Regents Office of Policy and Strategy, and Offices of Institutional Research at each of the 12 participating campuses.

The Course Materials Survey was modeled after peer-reviewed national and state textbook affordability surveys that addressed student spending, purchase behaviors, and points of impact for course material costs on academic decisions and the student's ability to progress. The survey also addressed the extent to which required materials were being used in the classroom.

For this survey, required course materials referred to textbooks, digital access codes, software, lab manuals, etc. that students were required to purchase as per the "Required Textbooks" section of their course syllabus. The survey did not concern supplementary or "recommended" materials that students were not required to purchase.

The results in this report are intended to help inform educational leaders and policymakers as they develop recommendations and initiatives geared toward increasing the affordability of required course materials and college in general. To provide further insight, demographic questions regarding income, financial aid, first-generation status, intention to transfer to a four-year institution, work habits, race, ethnicity, age, gender, and more were included.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions analyzed in this report are as follows:

1. On average, how much are Tennessee community college students spending on required course materials? Where and how are they making those purchases?
2. How do students perceive required material costs influence their academic decisions and ability to progress?
3. How often do students purchase required materials that are not used?

The report is organized beginning with this executive summary and key findings, followed by a more detailed description of findings relevant to the above research questions, and then finally an appendix with additional information on study design, participants, and references.

Additional analyses are forthcoming in the researcher's dissertation project, including whether these points of impact are significantly more pronounced for at-risk minority, low-income, and first-generation college student populations. Inquiries, comments, and feedback related to this research may be directed to Principal Investigator Elizabeth Spica ([spica@vols.utk.edu](mailto:spica@vols.utk.edu)).

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## PERC REPORT

2019 Tennessee Community College Student  
Course Materials Survey  
January 2020



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
TENNESSEE  
KNOXVILLE

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION  
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# SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

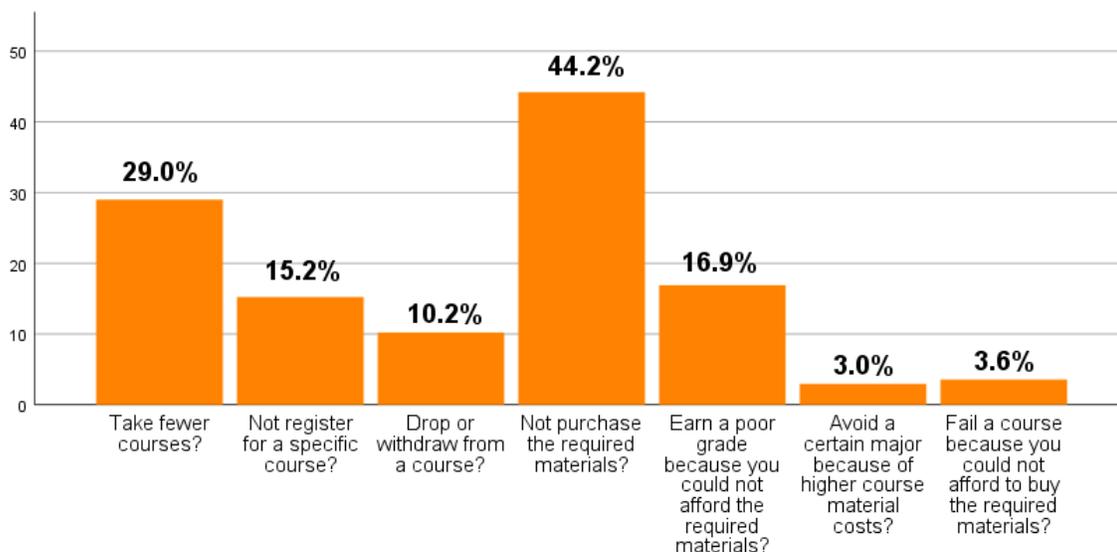
**KEY FINDING 1.** For the fall 2019 semester, students reported spending an average of \$119.18 per course. Students acquired materials most frequently from their campus bookstore, followed closely by online purchases from Amazon/Chegg.

Close to half (48.6%) of students spent over \$300 on course materials for the fall 2019 semester, with 20% spending more than \$500. Only 12.7% spent less than \$100. The most frequently reported spending range was between \$201 and \$300 (20.8%). Regardless of where they made the purchase, the purchase of used materials was more common than new, followed third by rentals. Students also reported relying on one another, with 17.1% borrowing or sharing materials. The campus library was the least utilized method of acquiring required materials.

**KEY FINDING 2.** Course material costs can have a negative influence on a student's academic decisions and ability to progress to graduation.

Due to the cost of course materials, at some point in their college career students have not purchased required materials (44.2%); taken fewer courses (29%); earned a poor grade (16.9%); not registered for a specific course (15.2%); and dropped or withdrawn from a course (10.2%). Of the 3% who reported avoiding specific majors because of course material costs, 75.5% of those majors were in STEM-related fields.

Points of Impact for Required Course Material Costs



Note: 1,792 respondents, with an average 1.6 items selected by each respondent

**KEY FINDING 3.** Students are purchasing required materials that are not being used.

More than forty percent of students (44.4%) reported purchasing required materials in the fall 2019 semester that were not being used. Throughout their time at their current community college, 43.5% reported purchasing materials that went unused either once or twice. Over ten percent (11.8%) have purchased materials that went unused three or more times.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Spica is a PhD student in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where her research focuses on solutions that reduce barriers to college affordability. At UT, she assists with the coordination and development of the undergraduate Leadership Studies Minor and serves as member of the UT Libraries Open Education Working Group. Prior to returning for her PhD, Elizabeth held roles in student success administration, marketing, and curriculum design for higher education publishing and EdTech companies.