

Student Voices and Student Leadership in the McMaster Textbook Affordability Survey

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Survey Overview

The rising cost of post-secondary education extends beyond tuition to include textbooks and other required course materials, placing a significant financial burden on students. At the same time, the increasing use of digital learning platforms has introduced new forms of pay-to-participate learning, where students must purchase access to complete assignments or receive grades.

Despite these growing challenges, there remains **limited institutional data capturing how students experience and navigate these costs**. This study surveyed current McMaster undergraduate students to better understand their spending on textbooks and course materials, as well as their purchasing behaviours and decision-making processes.

The survey builds on a previous textbook affordability survey conducted in 2021/2022, adding new questions focused on non-textbook course materials, including online homework platforms, software, and lab materials. Data was collected between September 22 and October 31, 2025, and the survey was widely promoted through campus channels, including digital signage, social media (McMaster University Libraries and the McMaster Students Union), a library news story, and posts on the university's learning management system (Avenue to Learn).

Student Leadership and Voices

This survey was co-developed with an undergraduate student, who serves as a co-investigator and previously served as a Student OER Advocate.

The decision to redesign and re-administer the survey was initiated by the student co-investigator, who identified an opportunity to build on previous textbook affordability surveys conducted at McMaster and other Ontario institutions. Drawing on this knowledge, they proposed expanding the survey to include more detailed questions, capturing both quantitative and qualitative data, and adding a new focus on non-textbook course materials, such as online homework platforms, software, and lab materials, which have seen increased use in recent years.

As part of this role, the student co-investigator contributed to:

- Developing survey questions, supported the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB) application
- Creating promotional materials
- Assisting with grant applications
- Conducting data cleaning and analysis once the survey concluded

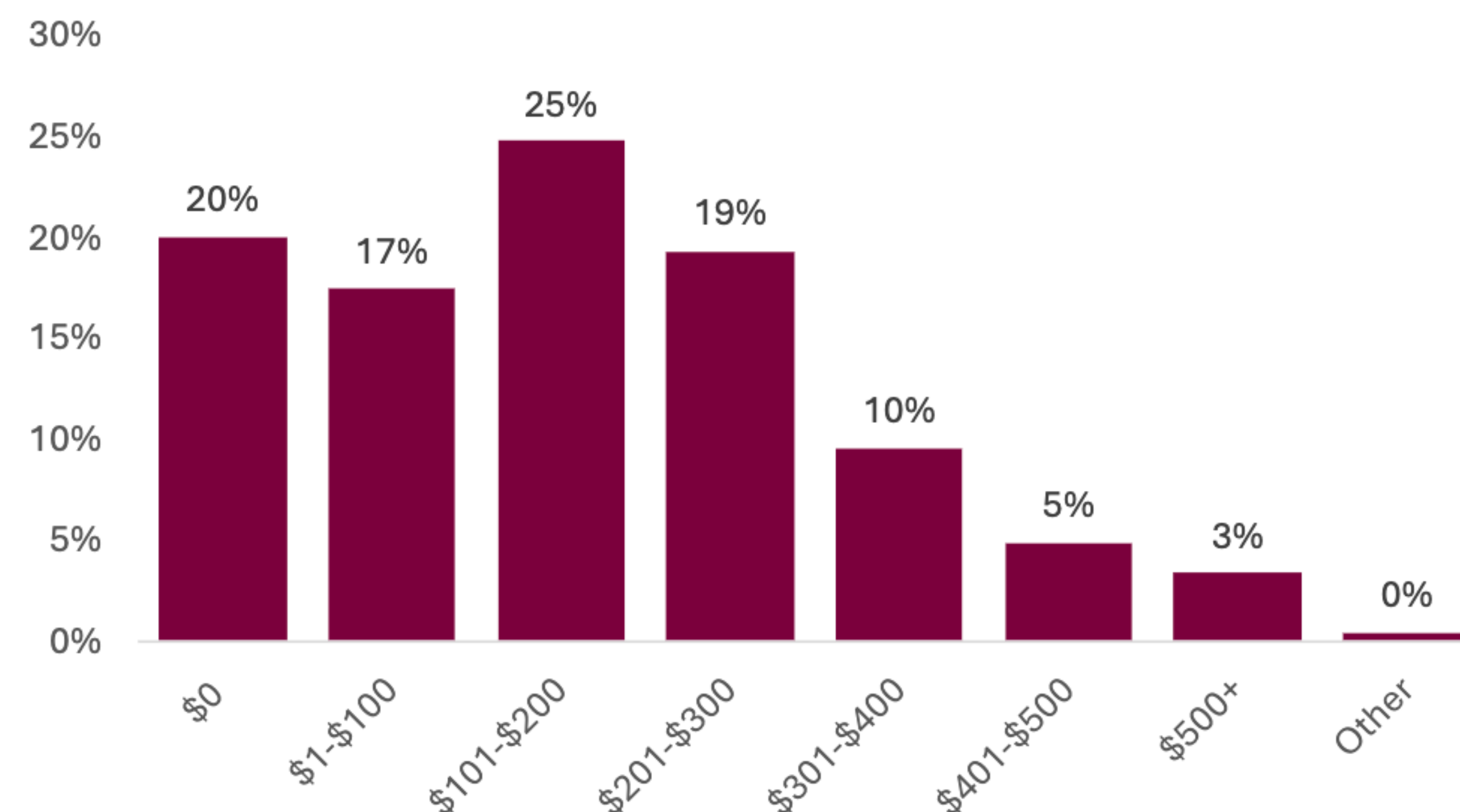
They also collaborated closely with the McMaster Students' Union, McMaster University Libraries, and other campus partners to promote the survey and increase student engagement.

Students as Partners in Open Education Research

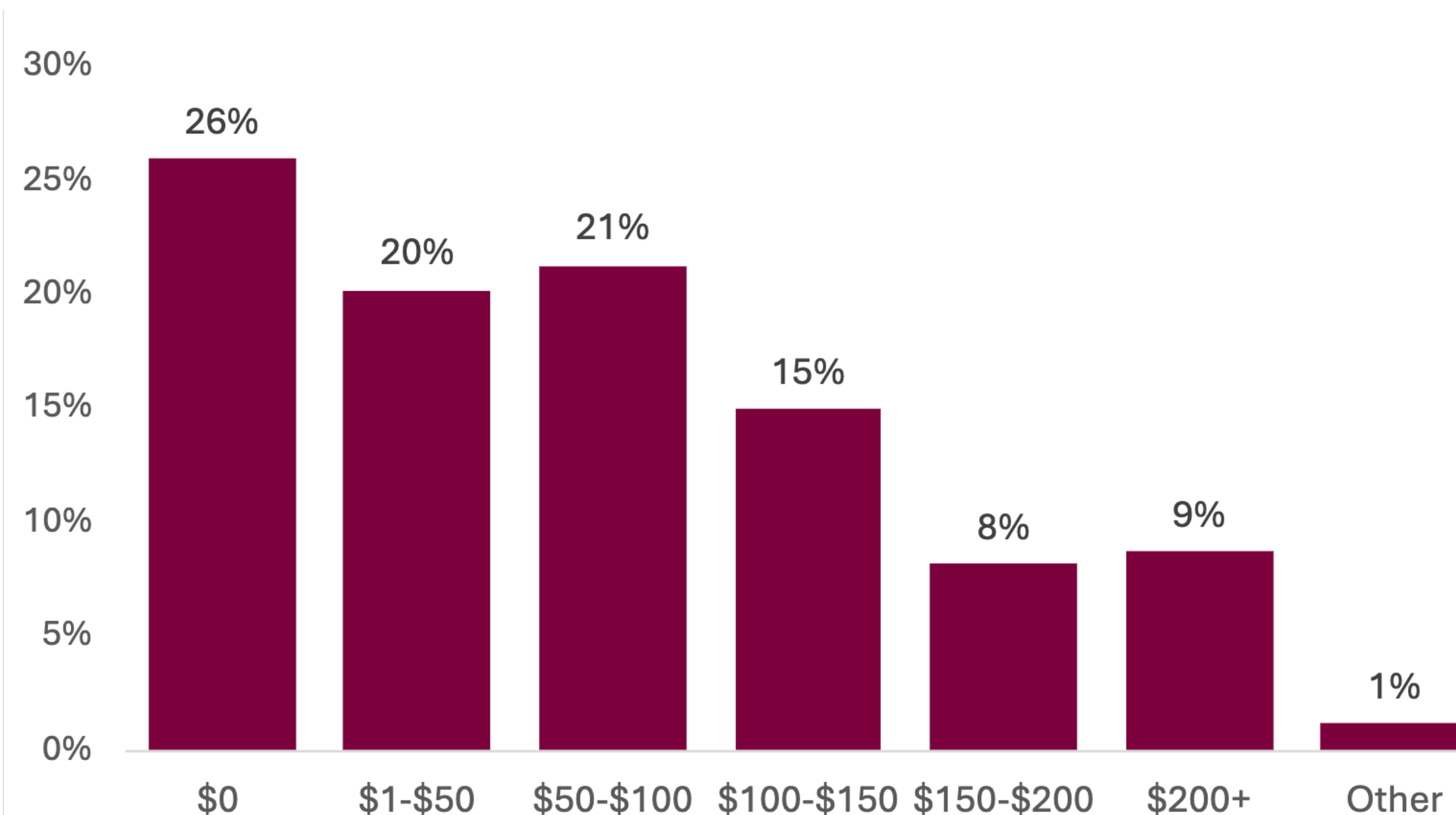
Our approach reflects a model of **students as active contributors to research, rather than passive participants**. Centering student voices was critical to this project and to OER work at large, as **students bring a unique and essential understanding of how course material costs affect their academic experiences, decision-making, and access to learning**. By co-creating this research with students, the project is better positioned to inform solutions that are responsive, equitable, and reflective of lived experience.

Results

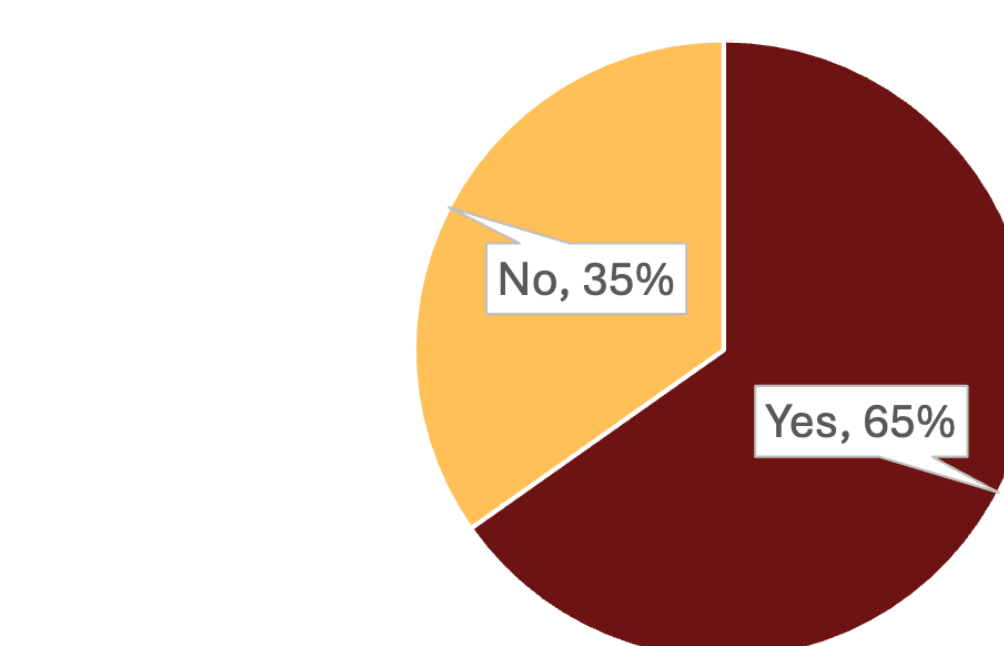
We received **2,960** responses to our survey. Since the study was restricted to current McMaster University undergraduate students, 203 responses did not meet the eligibility criteria, and we analyzed **2,757** responses, representing **approximately 9% of all undergraduate students at McMaster**.



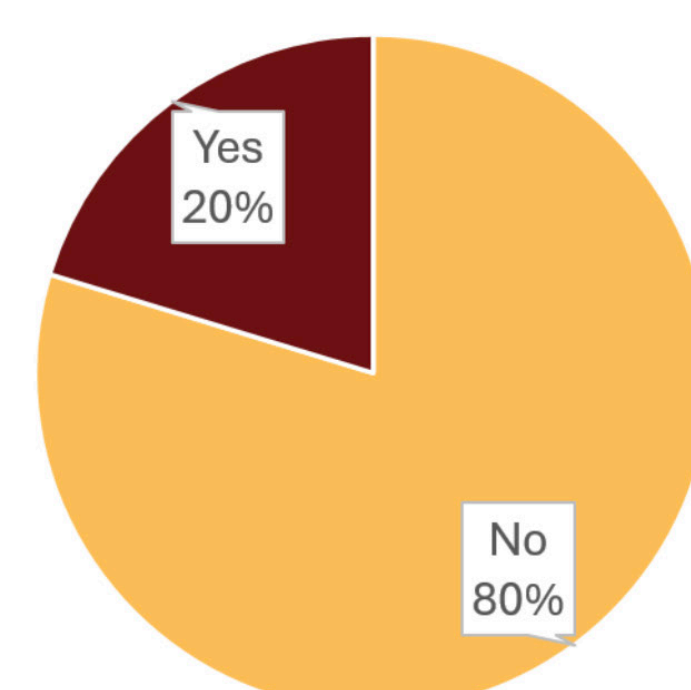
80% of students spent money on textbooks, with 25% spending \$101-\$200 and 18% spending over \$300 in Fall 2025.



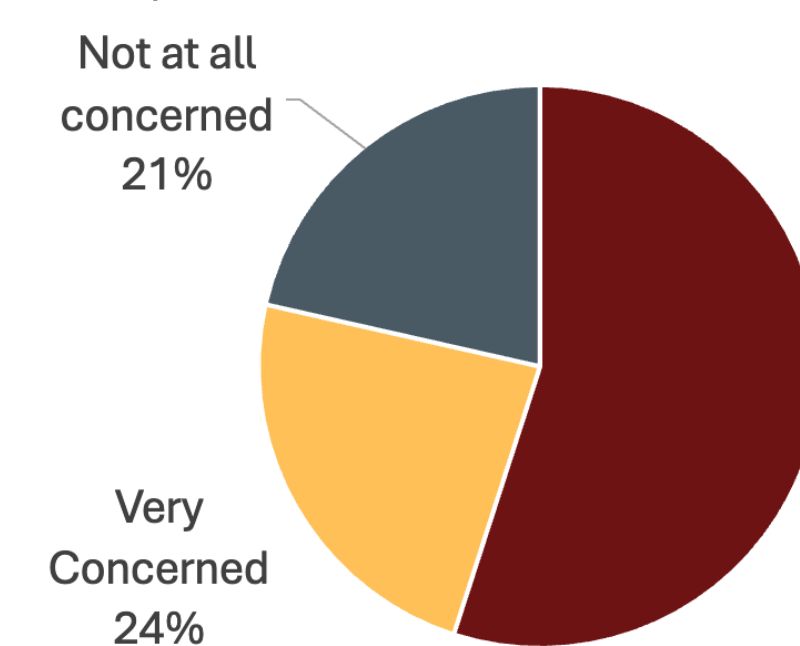
74% of students spent money on required non-textbook course materials, with 17% spending more than \$150.



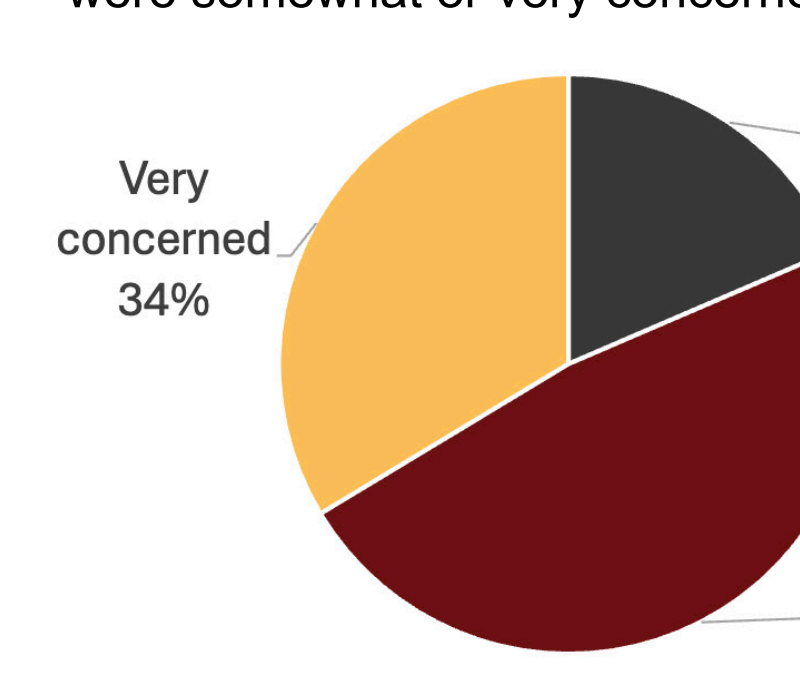
65% of students had forgone purchasing a required textbook.



20% of students had forgone purchasing a required course material other than a textbook.



79% of students who went without a required textbook were somewhat or very concerned about not having it.



82% of students who went without a required non-textbook course material were somewhat or very concerned about not having it.

Thematic Analysis

Course material costs compound existing financial pressures

Students described textbook costs as an additional burden alongside tuition, rent, groceries, and other living expenses. Some also questioned the value of expensive textbooks that were minimally integrated into their courses.

Students find alternatives, or go without

High textbook costs led students to seek free online alternatives, borrow materials, or forgo required resources altogether. Among students who had skipped a required textbook, **78% downloaded it online** and **59% went without a textbook**.

Digital learning costs can create inequities in assessment

Students expressed particular frustration with paying for platforms such as iClicker and TopHat when access was tied to participation or grades. Some students reported sacrificing these marks because they could not justify or afford the additional cost.

Students value accessible and open alternatives

Students responded positively when textbooks were available through the library or provided as free/open resources and expressed interest in seeing these options used more widely.

Recommendations and Future Steps

Based on student experiences captured through the survey, we recommend:

- Expanding institutional support for open and affordable course materials, including OER and library access to required resources.
- Reviewing the use of student-paid digital learning resources, particularly when payment is tied to participation, assignments, or grades.
- Increasing awareness of existing OER supports and creating clearer pathways for instructors to find, create, and adopt affordable materials.
- Embedding student voices in future decisions about course-material affordability, including institutional policies and programs.

The findings provide an evidence base for continued collaboration among students, instructors, libraries, and institutional leaders. Future work can build on this student-partnered approach to translate student experiences into changes in course-material practices and policy.

Acknowledgments

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