



RUTGERS-NEW BRUNSWICK
Institute for Teaching, Innovation,
and Inclusive Pedagogy

RUTGERS
University Libraries

CREATING AN AFFORDABLE COURSE @ RUTGERS INSTRUCTOR GUIDE



OVERVIEW

Course affordability matters for student success, and the evidence proves it.

In 2026 the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) declared open educational resources (OER), openly-licensed digital materials available at free or minimal cost, a new high-impact practice (AAC&U, 2026; Watson et al., 2026). The data were compelling; a mixed-methods analysis of over 700,000 student records from 15 institutions, surveys, and focus group findings showed that OER led to positive student outcomes and supported course affordability. Students in OER courses had lower withdrawal rates, higher achievement, and more timely graduation rates.

Previous studies corroborate the findings of the AAC&U. A meta-analysis conducted by Cho and Permzadian (2024) found that courses integrating OER had higher completion rates and course grades. The institution type, course type, or instructor did not have a significant impact. The authors concluded that OER was a scalable way to make higher education more accessible for students and positively impact students' success.

Using open materials can do more than reduce course costs. Because OER can be adapted and updated, instructors can incorporate more current information, real-world examples, and a greater diversity of voices and perspectives than may be represented in a traditional textbook.

Open approaches can also support learner-centered teaching by giving students opportunities to create, adapt, evaluate, or contribute to course content. This can make courses not only more affordable, but also more responsive, inclusive, and resonant to students' learning and life experiences.

The purpose of this guide is to provide guidance and resources to instructors at Rutgers for making their courses more affordable, support course access and reduce student debt, reducing barriers to learning whether through OER or other measures.

WHAT RUTGERS STUDENTS AND FACULTY SAY



The Libraries at Rutgers are a resource that continues to support course affordability through the Open and Affordable Textbooks program which provides instructors with funding to redesign their courses to implement OER or develop their own OER. They analyzed over 400 responses from Rutgers students and found unanimous support for the program given concern about the rising costs of course materials (Todorinova & Wilkinson, 2019). They collected quotes from 3,499 total responses as December 3, 2023, several of which are included below.

Student Comments

“Sometimes I would have to take a chance and complete a course without a textbook, which I believe hinders my final grade.”

“I often cannot afford textbooks so I will either find it online for free or not purchase it at all.”

“Not having the necessary course materials sets students up for academic failure.”

Faculty Comments

“The students were grateful not to have to purchase a book.”

“Students literally clapped when I announced that I do not use paid course materials.”

“Students were thrilled to not have to buy a textbook!”

“Our students are working and have little funding to spare. They even skip meals. We want to make textbooks as affordable as possible.”

INCREASING COURSE AFFORDABILITY I

Open Educational Resources

There are a variety of resources available online at little or no cost that may be integrated into a course as aligned with learning outcomes. Sample digital libraries include OpenStax and the Open Textbook library, among others. Review the [Library website](#) or consult with the librarian. The library also offers the [Open and Affordable Textbooks Program](#) (OAT) to which instructors can apply.



The Open and Affordable Textbooks (OAT) Program is an incentive program designed to make higher education more affordable for Rutgers students. Through OAT, the Libraries award research funds to Rutgers faculty who redesign their courses to use free or low-cost materials or who create a new open textbook. Our goal is to support course material affordability at Rutgers, promote the use of open and affordable educational resources, and empower faculty to innovate their teaching using open, free, or library-licensed materials and teaching aids.

Currently courses revised through OAT can receive a course affordability designation.

Fair Usage

In some circumstances, portions of copyrighted works may be shared with students under fair use or through library course reserves. Because fair use depends on the particular use and material, instructors should consult Rutgers Libraries' copyright guidance or a librarian when determining what may be shared through a course site. Please see the copyright guidance on the [Libraries website](#) for more information.

Access the guide for [fair usage](#).

INCREASING COURSE AFFORDABILITY II

Library Reserves

The Libraries support access to course materials through reserves, with options determined on a case-by-case basis. Depending on the title, we may already license an electronic version or suitable alternative, be able to digitize portions as copyright permits, or place a physical copy on reserve. Publisher terms, platform restrictions, copyright, and cost may limit some options, so we encourage faculty to reach out and speak directly with their [library liaison](#). The Libraries are here to help you explore options for making your course materials as affordable and accessible as possible.

Instructors can set up course reserves using the Reading List tool and provide direct access to required course materials in their Canvas course site. See the [library website](#) for more information about Reading Lists and Reserves. Sometimes new editions of textbooks have updates that do not impact the material learned in a course. In some cases, students might be able to obtain earlier editions from the library. Students might be able to purchase and use earlier editions at a more affordable price.

The Libraries support access to course materials. Additionally, publishers provide extra copies of textbooks to instructors that may be able to be lent to students.



Digital Materials

Journal articles, eBooks, and other digital texts can be obtained through the [Libraries](#).

DEPARTMENT AND PROGRAM DISCUSSIONS

One of the first steps to better understanding course affordability is to engage in dialogue around the topic within relevant communities. The questions below can be used or adapted by departments and programs to support reflection.

Discussion Prompts

1. Review course materials and their costs. Currently, what is the range of costs in your department or program? How do these costs compare to the national recommendation for affordable courses (e.g., at or below \$50)?
2. For any course materials that are high in cost, are alternatives available that can still support students in meeting course learning outcomes? If not, are there other ways to reduce costs?
3. Review course syllabi. Are they transparent regarding which course materials are required for the course and which are optional that students do not need to purchase?
4. Would developing departmental or program guidelines support course affordability? If so, what might be general guidelines that we include?
5. Are zero-cost courses an option for our department or program? Would it be possible for our students to not incur any additional course expenses in their last few years of their major (e.g., achieve a zero-degree)?
6. Do we have any feedback from enrolled students on course affordability, or how might we obtain and use such feedback?

SUPPORTING STUDENTS



- Be transparent with the class about course costs and how the course has been made more affordable.
- Be explicit on the course syllabus about which materials are required for the course, and which are not.
- Build trust and create a supportive brave space to provide a private space and work with any students to provide alternatives if they are unable to afford course materials.

CASE EXAMPLES

Below are several examples of how instructors completing the Open and Affordable Textbooks program have supported course affordability. More information about award recipients can be found on the [Libraries](#) website. Spring 2026 OAT Award recipients were projected to save students \$365,555 total across Rutgers University chancellor-led units.

- **Joanna Kempner**, Professor, School of Arts and Sciences, Rutgers-New Brunswick, redesigned the Sociology of Drug Course by replacing textbooks with a curated list of open materials. She also integrated a wider range of media to integrate more contemporary issues. 60 students impacted per year | Projected saving per year: \$9,000
- **Arpita Biswas**, Assistant Professor, School of Arts and Sciences, Department of Computer Science, Rutgers New Brunswick, redesigned the Design and Analysis of Algorithms course by adding lecture notes and slides to the course website as well as chapters from a free online book. 1,426 students impacted per year | Projected savings per year: \$142, 600

REFERENCES



AAC&U. (June 22, 2026). Open Educational Resources: A New High Impact Practice. <https://www.aacu.org/research/open-education-resources-a-new-high-impact-practice>

Cho, K. W., & Permzadian, V. (2024). The impact of open educational resources on student achievement: A meta-analysis. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 126, 102365. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0883035524000521>

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Acknowledgements

The creation of this guidebook was inspired by the Inclusive Course Materials guide created at Lafayette College (2022).