

BACKGROUND

What is Equitable Access?

Launched in the fall of 2020, Equitable Access is a program for textbooks that promises undergraduate students will receive all materials for all their classes for a flat fee (\$199 for the 2020-2021 school year).¹ Class materials are by default digital, with print copies of books that do not have a digital version provided by the bookstore.² As required by state law, students can opt out of paying the fee but must opt out from the entire program and not on a course-by-course basis.³

UC Davis has reportedly made an agreement with the twelve largest textbook publishers⁴ to give them a fixed amount of money for every student in a class that uses one of their books.⁵ The school asserts this will allow textbook publishers to make more money than they do now where few students buy a new copy, others rent, while some elect to not get the text at all.⁶ Jason Lorgan, the architect of the UC Davis Equitable Access program, admitted in an interview that “[a]t first, they [textbook publishers] laughed at us” but “stopped laughing” when he showed estimates of how much more revenue publishers could receive under this agreement.⁷

What are the arguments in support for Equitable Access?

Equitable Access aims to reduce inequity among students in textbook costs via a fixed price for all materials every quarter, regardless of course or major. The existing policy of using the campus average for textbook costs to calculate aid, as Lorgan claims, results in some students receiving insufficient financial support for purchasing course materials. Equitable Access claims to resolve this problem by creating a fixed price that financial aid calculations can use to make sure all students are given enough money to buy needed course materials.⁸

Another pro for Equitable Access is its ability to ensure that all students using its program can have access to their materials before the first day of class, mitigating possible confusion that arises at the start of every quarter. Currently, according to Lorgan, students must wait to get materials until they hear from their professors or read the syllabus to figure out which books to get and then shop around to get their textbooks; Equitable Access would instead send students a personalized link containing all their required materials, allowing all materials to be accessible in one place and immediately available at the start of instruction.

¹ Cindy Ruckman, “Evolution of Inclusive Access,” last modified December 22, 2020, <https://www.nacs.org/the-evolution-of-inclusive-accessedc9dbe2>.

² Bill Rosenblatt, “UC Davis’s Plan to Disrupt Textbook Publishing,” August 05, 2020, <https://copyrightandtechnology.com/2019/08/05/uc-daviss-plan-to-disrupt-textbook-publishing/>.

³ Ruckman, “Evolution of Inclusive Access.”

⁴ Ruckman, “Evolution of Inclusive Access.”

⁵ Rosenblatt, “UC Davis’s Plan.”

⁶ Rosenblatt, “UC Davis’s Plan.”

⁷ Goldie Blumenstyk, “Can a Health Insurance Model Bring ‘Equitable Access’ to the Textbook Market?,” *The Edge (blog)*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 18, 2019, <https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/the-edge/2019-06-18>.

⁸ Rick Anderson, “UC Davis Experiments with a New Textbook Model: An Interview with Jason Lorgan,” September 04, 2019, <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2019/09/04/uc-davis-experiments-with-a-new-textbook-model-an-interview-with-jason-lorgan/>.

METHODOLOGY

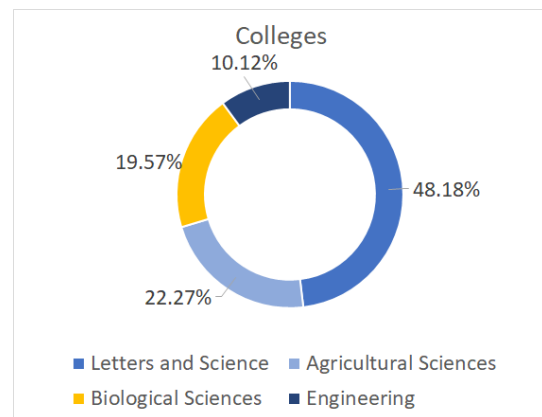
This report summarizes data obtained through an anonymous survey given to undergraduate students at UC Davis. The survey questions were reviewed and commented on by two UC Davis faculty members before the survey was opened for responses. The survey itself was administered through Qualtrics and was promoted by members of the ASUCD Executive and Legislative Branches exclusively online. Primary means of publicizing the survey included posting graphics with the survey's link on social media as well as sending a standardized message encouraging students to take the survey in Discord servers and Slack workspaces.

To confirm respondents were UC Davis undergraduate students, the survey asked whether they were a UC Davis undergraduate as the first question. For those who answered "no," the survey would automatically end. The Qualtrics program also prevented multiple responses from the same user.

DEMOGRAPHICS

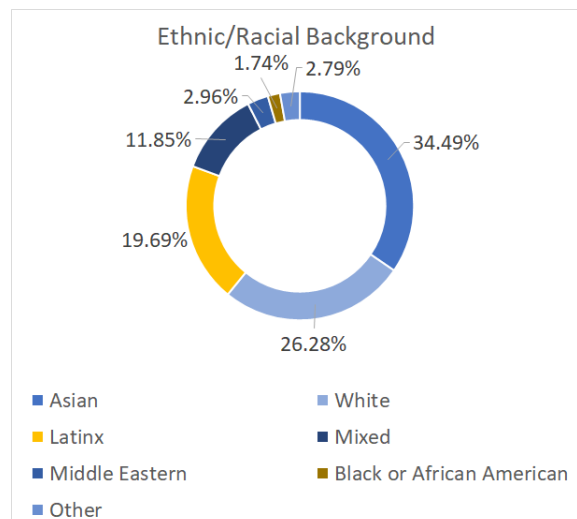
Major/College

We asked respondents to provide their major, with the surveyed student body showing representation from 76 unique majors. Using the majors provided by respondents, we assigned the response to the college that major belongs to (Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, Biological Sciences, Engineering, or Letters and Science). The breakdown of representation from each college can be seen in the chart to the right. For those who are double majors, we used the first major they put down and represented them once in the overall counts.



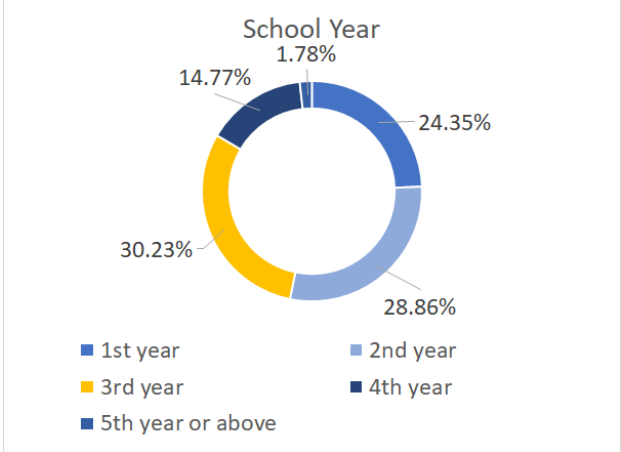
Ethnicity/Racial Background

574 students reported an ethnic or racial background; the proportions of each background is provided in the chart to the right.



School Year and Transfer Students

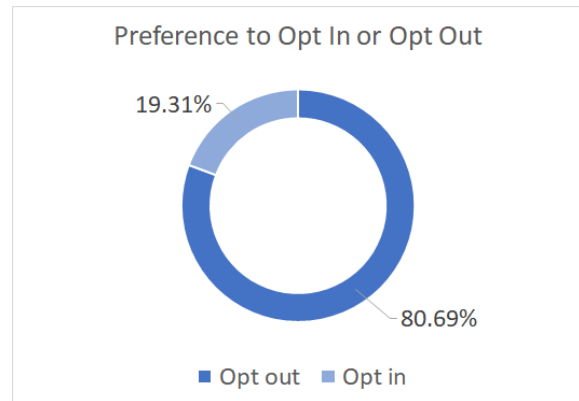
24.35% of survey respondents were first years, 28.86% were second years, 30.23% were third years, 14.77% were fourth years, and 1.78% were fifth years or above. Another demographic question the survey asked was whether the student was a transfer student. 110 students reported to be transfer students.



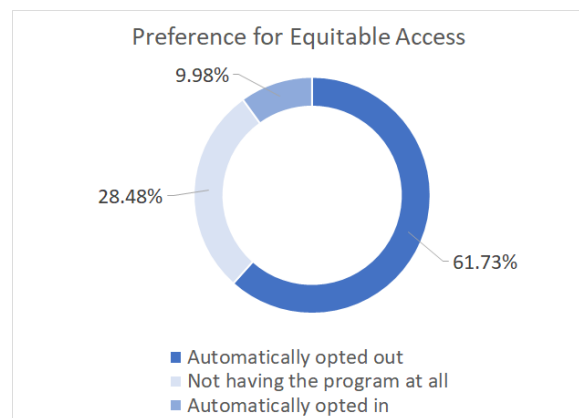
KEY FINDINGS

Finding #1: Most students surveyed prefer opting out of Equitable Access.

For the first question of the survey, UC Davis undergraduate students were asked whether they overall preferred to opt in or opt out of Equitable Access every quarter. Out of 844 responses, 681 or about 80.69% responded they prefer to opt out. Calculating a 95% confidence interval for the proportion of students who prefer opting out, we find that the lower and upper bounds are about 78.02% and 83.35%.



Another survey question asked undergraduates which of the following three options they preferred for the program: the current system of being automatically opted in with the option to opt out, automatically being opted out but being able to opt in at any time in the quarter, and getting rid of the program altogether. About 61.73% of the 797 responses for this question, or 492 students, reported they want to be automatically opted out of Equitable Access. This, combined with 227 students or 28.28% of question responses, shows that **a majority of students do not want to be automatically opted in to the Equitable Access program.**



Finding #2: For those opting out, the price of \$199 is considerably higher than what people are willing to pay.

Survey respondents who said they would choose to opt out for Spring 2021 were also asked at what price they chose to remain opted in to Equitable Access. There were 519 responses for this question, of which 149 respondents (28.71% of responses) said they would opt in at \$0 or only if the program was free.

We also calculated a 95% confidence interval of the mean price at which students who opted out would opt in to Equitable Access. The mean of the 519 responses was about \$56.81 (56.8131) and the lower and upper bounds of the 95% confidence interval was about \$51.13 (51.12894) and \$62.50 (62.49727) respectively.

There were also 29 responses to this question that were equal to or above the current price of \$199, indicating that some respondents may have misunderstood the question. If we remove these values, the mean drops to \$44.34 (44.34017) and the 95% confidence interval becomes between \$40.73 (40.73324) and \$47.95 (47.94709).

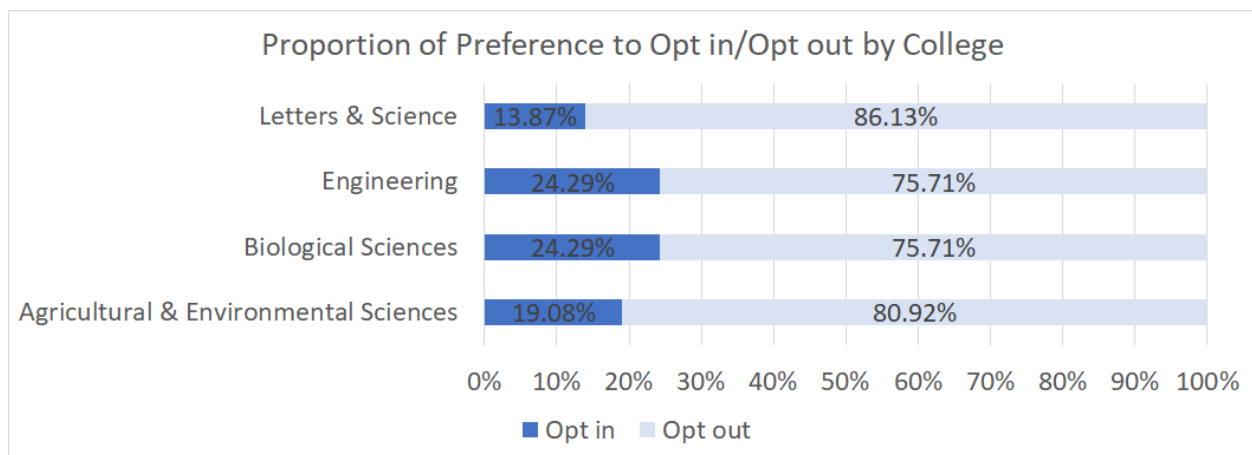
Regardless, both confidence intervals show that **the current price of \$199 is much higher than the undergraduate students who are currently opting out are willing to pay.**

Finding #3: Across all the colleges of UC Davis and income levels, the preference of the majority is to opt out.

If Equitable Access lowers the cost of materials as it claims for at least majors that have high textbook costs, we would expect to see some majors tending to opt in and others tending to opt out. However, a majority of students (at least 75%) from each of the four colleges, we found, generally prefer to opt out of Equitable Access each quarter.

	Opt in	Opt out
Agricultural & Environmental Sciences	29	123
Biological Sciences	34	106
Engineering	17	53
Letters & Science	38	236

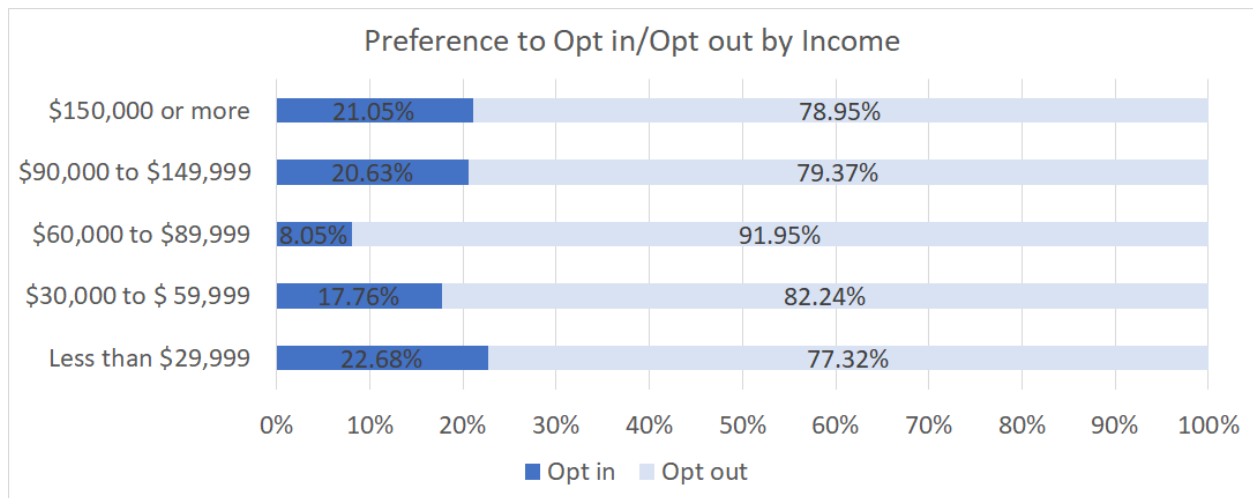
We created a contingency table (above) based on responses that answered both the question asking for opt in or opt out preference and the question asking for one's major. We aggregated this data by college and displayed the data in a stacked bar chart (below).



Though data looking at individual majors or programs could be beneficial to see if there are specific majors where the cost of Equitable Access is worth it, this seems unlikely. For example, Lorgran's oft-used anecdote of an engineering student who switched their major because of the major's high costs of books⁹ suggests engineering majors would want to take advantage of this program. However we found that only 1 in 4 actually do.

Additionally, we did the same for income level as well. The contingency table and the stacked bar chart are below:

	Opt in	Opt out
Less than \$29,999	22	75
\$30,000 to \$ 59,999	19	88
\$60,000 to \$89,999	7	80
\$90,000 to \$149,999	26	100
\$150,000 or more	24	90

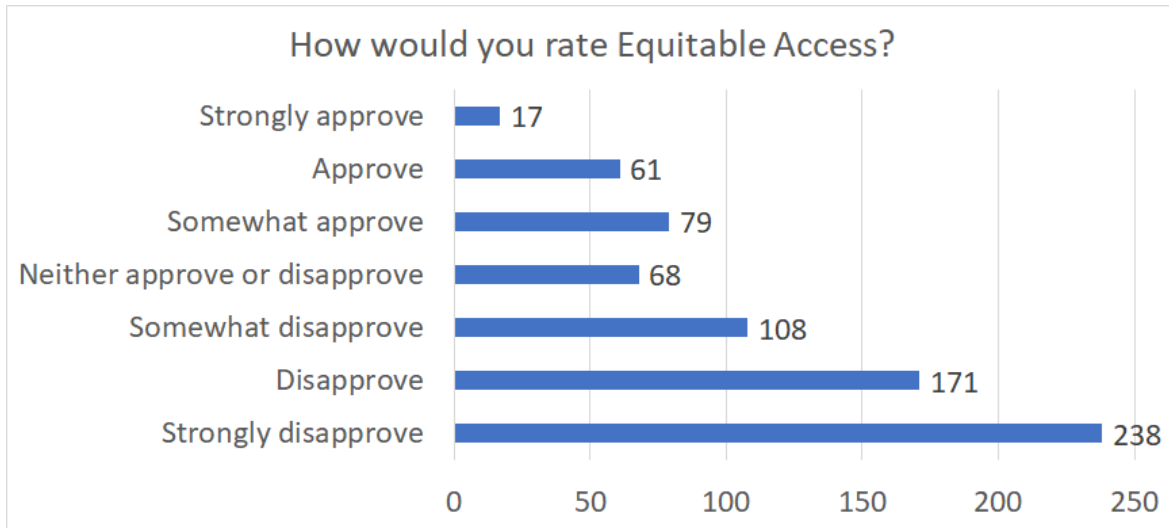


Like majors, we saw a majority of at least 77% from each income level prefer to opt out each quarter. Though Equitable Access should arguably appeal to those from a lower income background, the proportion of those opting in is relatively similar across all income levels.

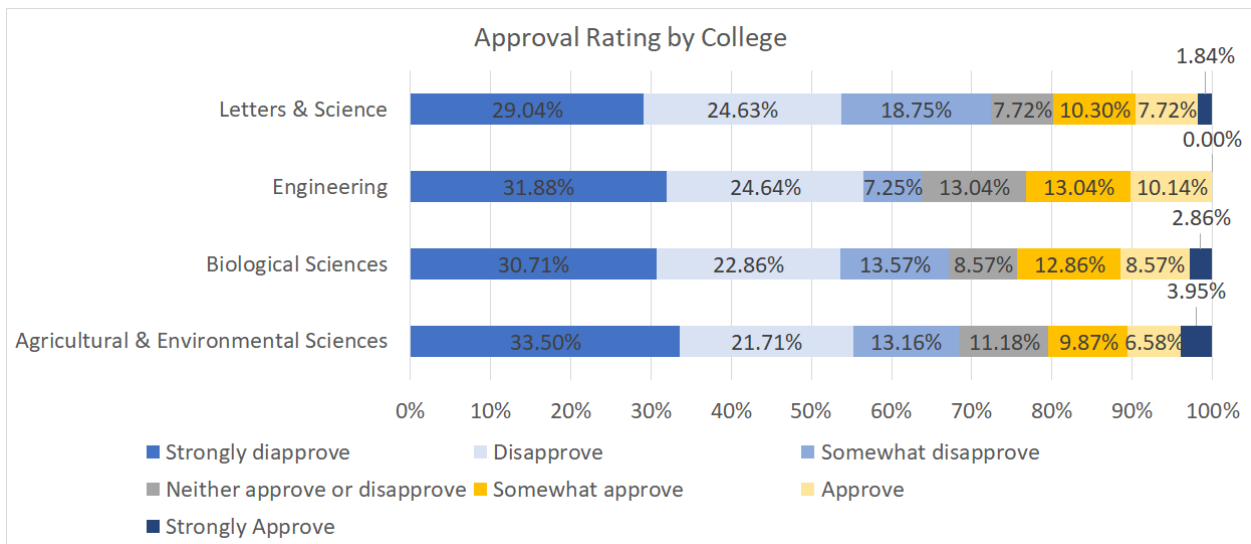
⁹Ruckman, "Evolution of Inclusive Access"; Blumenstyk, "Can a Health Insurance Model Bring 'Equitable Access?'"

Finding #4: The overall approval rating of UC Davis undergraduates for the Equitable Access program is low.

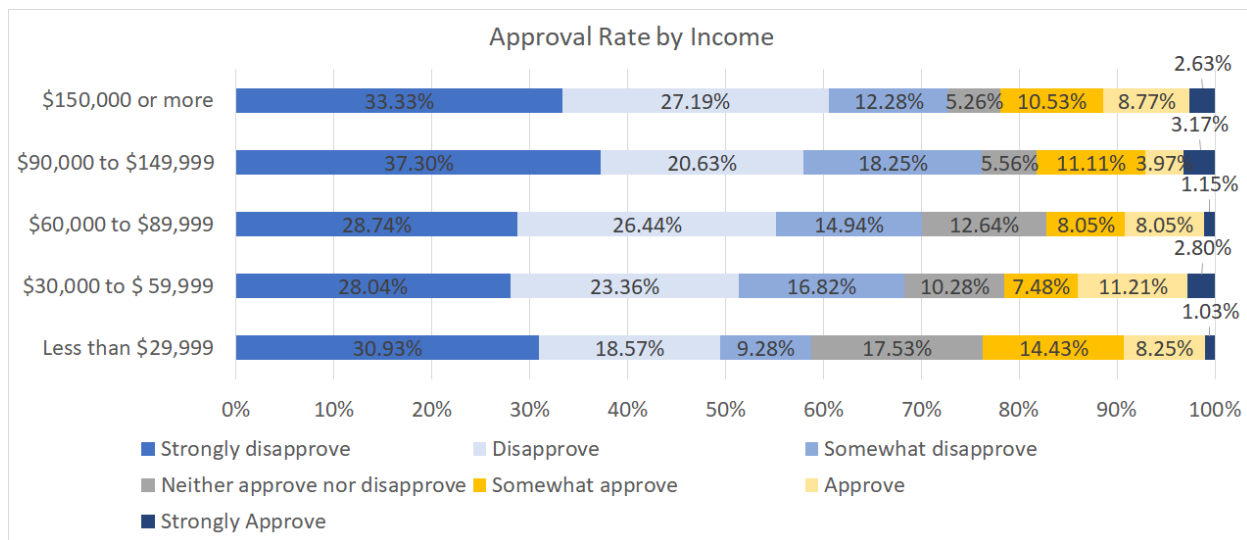
Respondents were asked to rate Equitable Access on a scale of 1 to 7, 1 being “strongly disapprove” and 7 being “strongly approve.” The most common response was a 1 or “strongly disapprove” with 238 responses, or about 32.08%. Additionally, 517 respondents, or about 69.68%, expressed some sort of disapproval.



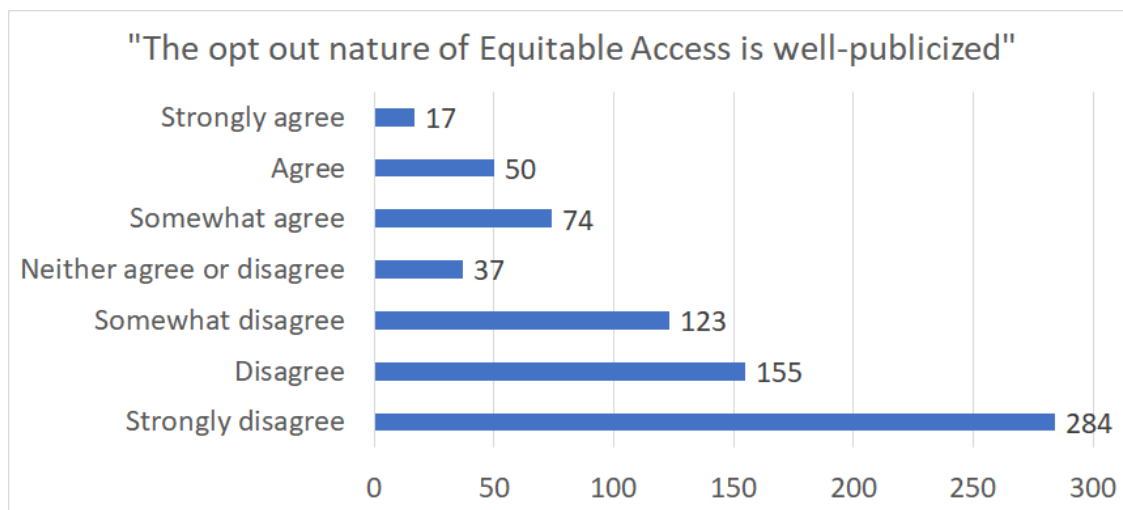
We also found similar rates of disapproval across all four colleges and income levels as well. For each college, a majority of students expressed some sort of disapproval and about 30% of students from each college put “strongly disapprove.”



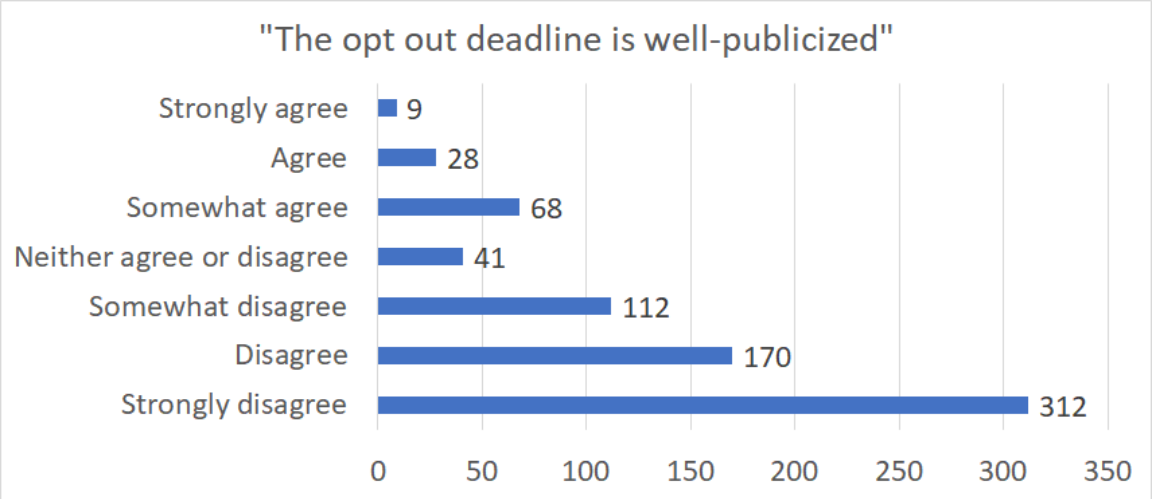
This did not change when comparing approval rate by income either; again about 30% from each income level “strongly disapprove” and a majority expressed some sort of disapproval.



We also found high levels of dissatisfaction with the transparency of Equitable Access. When asked to rate how much they agree or disagree with the statement “The opt out nature of Equitable Access is well-publicized,” a majority of 75.95% (562 out of 740 responses) expressed some level of disagreement.



More concerning, a majority of 80.72% (594 out of 740 responses) at least somewhat disagreed that the opt out deadline is well-publicized, with 42.16% (312 out of 740 responses) of respondents strongly disagreeing. This clearly shows students are not notified adequately when the deadline to opt out is.



CONCLUSION

Overall, after one year the Equitable Access program has been initiated, our survey results show that the opinion of the student body is mostly negative. This holds true across the four colleges and all income levels, suggesting that the program is not seen as beneficial to those of any major or income level. This is despite the fact that Equitable Access touts the fact that majors with high textbook costs and those from lower income backgrounds would benefit the most from this program.

Thus, most students tend to opt out, regardless of major or income level, and would like to see the program automatically opt them out each quarter. We also found that the price tag of \$199 each quarter is significantly higher than what students on average are willing to pay to remain opted in the program. Finally, there was a concerningly high level of respondents reporting that the opt out nature and the opt out deadline were not well-publicized. This highlights the need that the program, if it continues to automatically opt students in, must improve the way it notifies students of this fact as well as when they are able to opt out by.