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Student textbook purchasing: the hidden cost of time

Stacy Katz, Lehman College

ABSTRACT

When students search for their assigned textbooks, they try to find bargains. They scour the used and rental markets for the cheapest prices or use their library or their friends to borrow and copy. In surveying students about their textbook purchasing habits, I found that most students visited multiple stores or websites, but those who purchased textbooks ultimately only purchased from the campus bookstore/bookstore website or Amazon.com. Approximately twenty percent of students reported spending more than two hours purchasing textbooks and almost ninety percent say that the time they spend purchasing textbooks takes them away from other obligations in their lives. By assigning openly available or free resources, faculty can help students save time, in addition to money.

Keywords: textbooks, textbook acquisition, textbook purchasing open educational resources, oer

Introduction

At the reference desk of libraries in any academic institution, the beginning of the semester is the busiest time of year helping students find a copy of their textbook on reserve or an older edition in the stacks or at another library. Once students check out a reserve copy of a textbook, they spend time photocopying what they need, or scanning and emailing content to themselves. Students express frustration when a copy of the textbook they need is checked out - or worse - not owned by the library. Librarians often mediate this frustration and provide direction for students on the best way to obtain their books - usually aiming for quickly and cheaply.

One of my colleagues directed me to show students the City University of New York (CUNY) website on textbook purchasing (CUNY, 2018), which lists the many ways students can purchase or rent textbooks. The website is meant to provide a guide for students in finding the best price. This website caused me to wonder how students navigate their way through acquiring textbooks, as well as reflect on how they can navigate through this process and how time-consuming it is. Bargain hunting in textbook purchasing is heralded as a benefit, but does it also interfere with student success? Do students still use their bookstore, or is most purchasing done online? Do they search more than one place for books? How long does it take for them to search for their books? These questions led me to examine the available options for students and how they might navigate this process.

As I began to wonder about these questions, I became involved in my college's Open Educational Resources (OER) initiative where I learned about the benefits for students, such as day one access to materials for free. It seemed that one yet unheralded benefit of OER might go beyond the cost savings by relieving stress for students by removing the need to find and acquire textbooks. I wondered how students acquired their textbooks and how much time they spend looking for the best price on their textbooks.

Textbooks in the modern academy

Over the past ten years, textbook costs at colleges and universities have increased dramatically, 88% between 2006 and 2016 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Major media outlets, advice websites, and even colleges encourage students to comparison shop in order to get the best deal on textbooks. Traditionally, students purchased textbooks at the brick-and-mortar campus bookstore. Technology has increased options available to students, permitting purchases and rentals through online retailers for physical books as well as ebooks. For a single textbook, a student may be able to choose to purchase or rent a textbook either new or used, physical or electronic, from a number of online retailers.

Within the context of the neoliberal university, the treatment of student as consumer permeates every aspect of students' lives. The messaging around textbook acquisition makes it clear that it is incumbent upon the student to get the best deal they can. Students are expected to act as rational players in the textbook market and spend time bargain-hunting, rather than learning. In this paradigm, the textbook is purchased in order to be sold back at the end of the semester, or rented and returned. It is not an enduring learning object for a student to revisit, but one to use during the semester, and then quickly forgotten, never to be considered again. The student identity as a consumer shapes their view of the textbook as a product for purchase. The faculty teaching the course is not the seller of the textbook, nor even necessarily the writer or creator. The faculty is the selector, but has little hand in shaping the resource or its price.

Faculty has the decision-making power over which textbooks are assigned, yet students are the ones who actually determine whether they will purchase the textbook. Students search multiple retailers for assigned textbook. Finding the best deal on a textbook takes a

Student textbook purchasing: the hidden cost of time

significant amount of time. This detracts from other obligations students have, including studying for their courses. Even when students do not purchase the textbook or find the textbook at a low cost, they spend time searching for the best price.

The time students spend acquiring textbooks contains an opportunity cost. Students are forced to spend time trying to figure out how and if they will acquire their textbooks. Students who do not purchase the textbook spend time photocopying one from a friend or the library. Average textbook cost varies by discipline, however, data collected on student spending at colleges and universities on textbooks and increases in textbook prices suggest “a growing number of students are not purchasing all of their required textbooks new and at full price” (Jhangiani and Jhangiani, 2017, p.173).

How students buy textbooks

For decades, the campus bookstore served as the hub of textbook purchasing activity of the college or university. Faculty would submit a form to the bookstore with information regarding the textbook, and the bookstore in turn would supply the textbook for students to purchase. Students would visit the bookstore and see one price for the textbook. They could choose to purchase the textbook either new or used at the bookstore, try to find a copy on reserve at the library, or ask a friend who had taken the class previously whether they could buy or borrow their copy of the book. Students could reasonably expect that if they purchased the textbook at the bookstore, the bookstore would buy back their book at the end of the semester. As McGowan and Stephens explain, before the internet, “the acquisition process meant going to the bookstore, searching the shelves, selecting their books, and then standing in line to make their purchases” (2015, p.85). The options available to students were fairly limited.

Through the development of online shopping, the number of retailers selling textbooks has proliferated. The places for students to purchase textbooks goes far beyond just the bookstore, or even the bookstore and the bookstore’s website. When students buy other goods, they can choose the item with the cheapest price. Students are not free to purchase just any textbook on a given subject. Instead, they try to find the cheapest price on the textbook assigned by their faculty. Students frequently purchase older editions of a textbook if they can to obtain a better price. Many students go without buying the textbook. According to the Florida Virtual Campus Survey, 66.6% of students reported they did not purchase a textbook due to the cost (2016, p.5). Students need to do extra work to identify which the textbook the professor uses before they register for a course. The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) asks colleges to provide lists of assigned textbooks for each course during registration. This information is not always present, nor is it always accurate, but it should theoretically be available to students in advance of registration (Student PIRGs, 2012). Students can query friends or look on websites that rate the professor in the hope it is mentioned in the website’s comments.

Textbook purchasing is complicated by the introduction of access codes, which are “unique serial numbers that give students access to a variety of online materials, like digital books, study guides, homework assignments, quizzes and tests” (Carrns, A. 2016). Students can be required to purchase these access codes on their own or with the required textbook. These codes make it difficult for students to use a library copy or get a used version, as they can’t be shared or reused. Students do not have the option to comparison shop, but are only left with the choice to purchase a new access code or do without the materials altogether. The access code is frequently linked to homework systems, which makes sharing or borrowing options impossible.

Course material prices are high. The College Board estimates the cost of required books and supplies for college at \$1,200/year. The cost of textbooks has increased exponentially over the last 30 years, with an increase in cost of 812% since 1978. In the Florida Virtual Campus Student Textbook and Course Materials Survey, 66.6% of students surveyed did not purchase the required textbook, even though most knew it would lead to a poor course grade. In the same survey, students report that textbook costs can also affect time to graduation, as students reported taking fewer courses, not registering for a course, dropping a course, or withdrawing from a course due to of textbook costs (2016). In essence, escalating textbook costs prevent students from achieving the goal of completing their degree.

Examples of guidance on textbook purchasing

One example of the list of places to acquire a textbook comes from the University Office of Computing and Information Services at City University of New York (CUNY)’s list of retailers beyond the campus bookstore. This guide for students includes seventeen websites that sell used books, twenty-one websites for comparison shopping, one website for online book swaps, twelve websites that sell ebooks, and ten websites to rent textbooks. This list includes some duplication between websites that sell ebooks, used textbooks, and rent textbooks (bncollege.com, chegg.com). The site explains to students that this list is “not exhaustive, so students are encouraged to research other options” (Textbook Savings, 2018). It also includes a sidebar encouraging students to seek free downloads or open source through some open textbook catalogs, as well as ask their professors for unbundled textbooks. The site still warns students that this list is “not exhaustive, so students are encouraged to research other options. Be sure to check with your professor that the version of the textbook you select can be used in your class” (CUNY, 2018). Even with over sixty websites, the list is not considered comprehensive and students must discuss their textbook with each professor. Searching each of these sites and finding the best deal takes time - and then making sure the professor approves of the title they select also takes time away from other student obligations.

Another example of the quest for cheap textbooks is in the *Guide to Being Not-Rich*, a collaborative document from students at University of Michigan. The guide to being “not-rich” is a crowd-sourced document aimed at sharing advice between students and alumni who feel or have felt marginalized at school. Students and alumni contribute and comment on this document to share advice and learn from each other how to get by in college. The guide provides advice “for anyone who has ever felt marginalized on campus — particularly students who are economically disadvantaged, and especially low-income students of color, whose racial background is

Student textbook purchasing: the hidden cost of time

often compounded by their SES [socio-economic status]. In it, we lay out the issues with which we grapple most and their solutions, both immediate and long-term.” (Guide to Being Not-Rich, 2017). Textbooks comprise the third section of this guide, after employment and housing, showing how large this cost looms in the mind of students. The textbook advice begins with the free options, including interlibrary loan and public libraries. It then discusses purchase options, such as buying from classmates on Facebook class pages or using online comparison sites to find the cheapest price. Finally, the authors note that they do not endorse piracy, but due to high textbook costs, some students may believe this is their only option, so they provide tips on how to safely find pirated files online. Simply to acquire the materials they need to do well in class, students are compromising their online safety. Their advice is garnered from student experience and reflects their true experiences in purchasing textbooks. OER is not mentioned in the body of the document, though I have added it as a comment on the Google Doc. While students can advocate for OER, the decision to redesign a course with OER or ZTC materials is up to the faculty member, and does not help the student in the moment. Some institutions have started to add a ZTC designator to courses so that students can search for these classes before registration. However, until OER is more common, students may still have required courses with no OER or ZTC option.

Surveying students on textbook acquisition

In this study, I surveyed students to find out how and where they looked for their textbooks, where they ultimately purchased materials, if they chose to rent or buy, and how long they spent acquiring materials. The goal of this study is to begin to understand how students make choices about textbook acquisition and if time spent purchasing textbook detracts from obligations.

Method

The study focused on a sampling of students enrolled in college, specifically at an urban public college. The survey was approved through the college’s Institutional Review Board. The survey was distributed during the Fall 2016 semester via campus email and posted to the college Learning Management System. For successfully completing the survey, students were offered a chance to win one of four \$25 Amazon gift cards. The impact of the incentive on the response rate is unknown. However, students’ odds of winning one of four gift cards across an entire campus were quite low. Of 13,329 graduate and undergraduate students who could have accessed the survey, 622 students returned usable surveys. The sample Survey data was anonymous; therefore, it is possible though unlikely for a student to have completed the survey more than once. No questions were required to be answered in order to complete the survey and, as a result, totals vary for each question.

Demographics

A number of characteristics were included in the questions, such as undergraduate or graduate status, part-time or full-time status, age, and first-generation status. Ninety-one percent of the sample were undergraduate students (n=565). Undergraduate students were slightly overrepresented in the sample as eighty-two percent of students at Lehman College were undergraduate students in Fall 2016. Seventy-three percent were full-time students (n=455), which is also overrepresented as compared to the percentage of full time students in Fall 2016 as fifty-eight percent. The OER initiative was in planning stages and courses had not yet been redesigned with OER at the time of this survey. Therefore, no questions were asked about OER or Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) classes.

Analysis

Students answered questions about the number of textbooks they were assigned this term, excluding course packs or free materials, and which websites they visited when textbook shopping. These questions were considered in order to better understand how students acquired their textbooks and how much time they spend looking for the best price on their textbooks. Students reported that they were assigned 1.1 textbook per course, on average. From the question asking about which stores or sites they visited while textbook shopping, I could calculate the number of stores or sites visited. Only 24% of students report looking at only one website. Sixty percent of students looked at two or three sites, and 15% looked at four or more sites or stores.

Figure 1

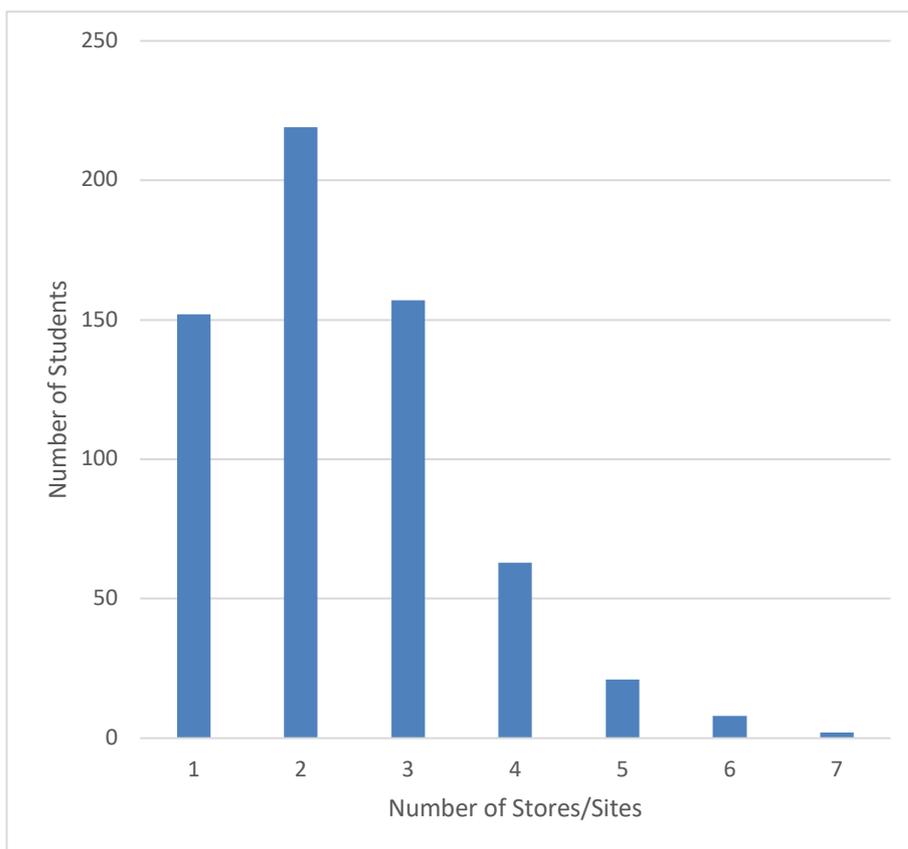


Figure 1. Number of stores or websites visited by students.

Figure 1 shows that most students visit between one and three websites, though some students visit as many as seven websites while searching for their textbooks.

Despite visiting multiple websites, students most frequently purchased from the campus bookstore or Amazon.com. Students rely on the used textbook market, as 60% mostly bought or rented used textbooks. Only 17% of students purchased new textbooks. Seven percent purchased digital downloads, which are not available used or through borrowing.

Table 1

New		Used		Borrowed	
Bought	16.60%	Bought	35.60%	Library	7.70%
Rented	6.90%	Rented	24.70%	Friend	2%
Digital Download	6.50%				
Total	30%	Total	60.20%	Total	9.70%

Table 1. Percentage of students who acquired new or used books, or borrowed books.

Table 1 shows how students acquired their books based on whether they bought or rented, or if the book was new or used. The majority of students reported spending between thirty minutes and two hours textbook shopping per semester. A significant number of students, approximately twenty percent, spent more than two hours on textbook shopping. This is a fairly large group of students spending time acquiring textbooks, rather than managing other obligations.

Figure 2

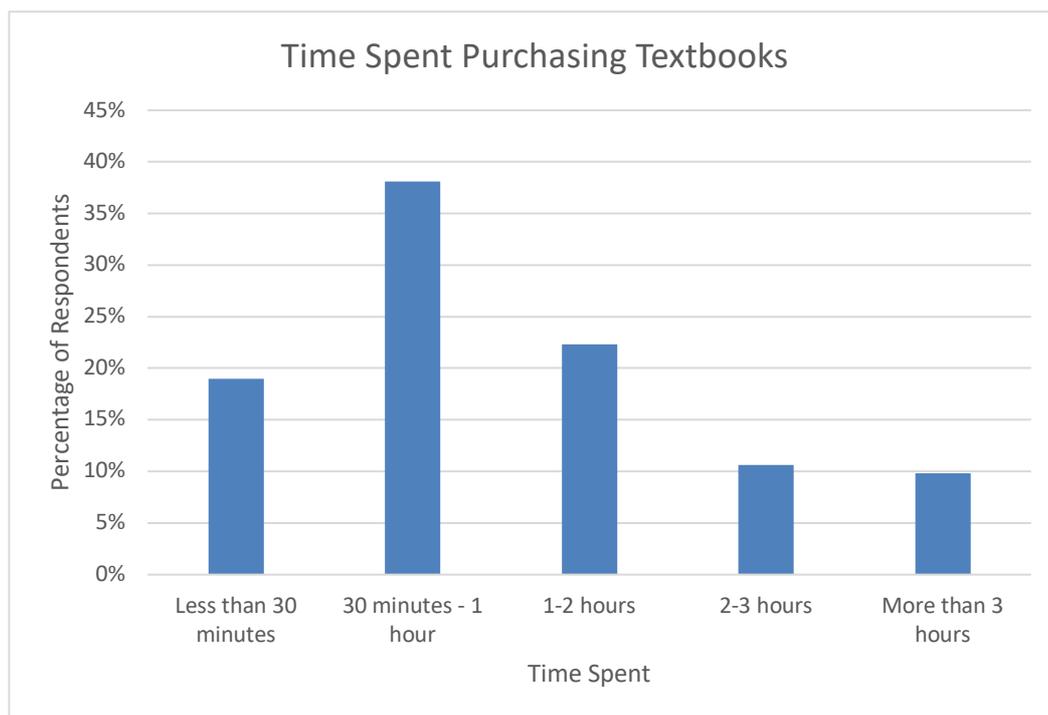


Figure 2. This chart illustrates the percentage of time students spend textbook shopping.

As Figure 2 demonstrates, forty-three percent of respondents spent more than an hour textbook shopping. Of that, twenty-one percent spend more than two hours.

Figure 3

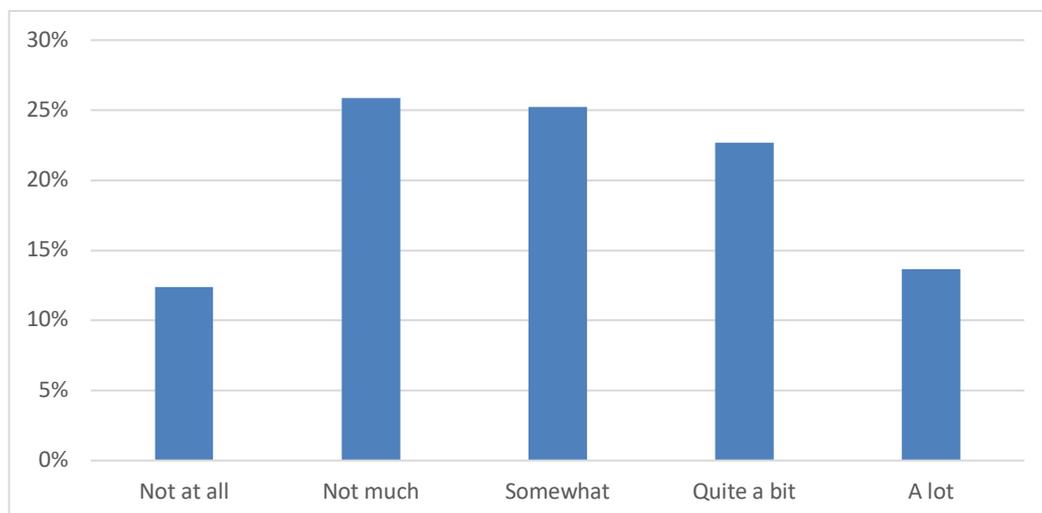


Figure 3. This graph shows the percentage of students who report that time spent purchasing textbooks detracts from other obligations.

As shown in Figure 3, 87.6% of students report that the time spent purchasing textbooks had an effect on the time they could spend on obligations, such as studying, working, or taking care of family members.

Discussion

Students can choose to rent or buy textbooks from a number of websites. Despite available options, in this survey most students report they acquire their textbooks from Amazon.com or the campus bookstore/bookstore website. Students spend time at the beginning of the semester trying to get the best price they can on their textbooks. Students may find a better price through comparison shopping,

Student textbook purchasing: the hidden cost of time

but almost all students reported that it also detracts from time they are able to spend on other responsibilities. According to research done by Wisconsin HOPE Lab, seventy-one percent of students are sometimes concerned about paying for college. In the same study, students report that financial concerns lead them to cut back on academic expenses (2016). As one student remarks in this survey in the field designated where they acquire their textbooks, “i [sic] try to make do without my textbooks as long as possible, because often the professor doesn’t even reference them, and you find out that you wasted your money buying it. I don’t have money to waste.” Students often need to wait to purchase textbooks by weeks or months into the semester because their financial aid is not available until after the semester begins. However, students do not have time to waste, both in time spent searching for textbooks, and also in time where they fall behind in their classes from not having access to course materials.

Students are unable to solve this issue on their own, as they have no choice in what textbooks faculty assign. Students do make choices about how to respond to faculty textbook selections, like not purchasing required books, purchasing older editions that may be out of date, or spending excessive amounts of time photocopying or shopping for assigned books. These choices can and do have negative impacts on their learning.

There is, however, another option. Faculty could choose to assign OER instead of textbooks. This eliminates questions for students of where, how, or if to purchase the textbook or take the course. OER provide day one access to students. OER are free to use and grant permission to retain, reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute the materials. Studies have found that OER are of comparable quality to textbooks and the use of OER does not negatively influence students learning (Hilton III, J., 2016). In addition to financial and pedagogical benefits, the use of OER can save students time and unnecessary stress. Some may argue that digital downloads and automatic purchasing models help students by eliminating time spent comparison shopping, yet these models force students to consent to give up certain privacies, and they no longer own the materials once the course ends. Further, the student cannot keep nor can they resell the course material. With OER, on the other hand, students have immediate access to the resources for their class and they are free to keep the resources for as long as they want them. OER goes beyond the benefits of free by changing the students’ relationship with their textbook.

The stress and scarcity of time students face must be considered in higher education, not just in those institutions where students face major financial challenges, but in all institutions, as each contains students who are “not-rich.” “For those who design and implement anti-poverty initiatives, it’s important to recognize that while scarcity can help people focus on costs and benefits, it can also cause stress that shifts attention and steals cognitive bandwidth” (Walton, A., 2018). This stress can be hard to quantify, but affects students’ ability to achieve learning goals. The entire student experience must be examined to facilitate students being able to spend time on learning, rather than buying textbooks.

Further research

Future research should continue to investigate the student experience in relation to time spent on learning, as well as other obligations in students’ lives. The possibility that OER can help free students from some of the stress in their lives and remove a barrier to learning is worthy of further exploration. Time spent purchasing textbooks is one obstacle to student success. Students are crowd-sourcing solutions to their problems through documents like the “Guide to Being Not-Rich at UM” (Schandavel, L., 2018). Researchers can use these documents as a starting point to identify barriers that students face and begin the conversation to find solutions at the campus, local, national, and international levels.

Biography

Stacy Katz is an Assistant Professor and Open Resources Librarian-STEM Liaison at Lehman College, CUNY.

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Student textbook purchasing: the hidden cost of time

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