

WHERE DO COLLEGE STUDENTS PURCHASE TEXTBOOKS?

**Nina Krey
Kenneth E. Clow
Laurie A. Babin
University of Louisiana Monroe**

ABSTRACT

Textbooks are an important component of higher education. Information about where students purchase textbooks and if they even purchase the textbook is very limited. The purpose of this study was to examine the different sources students used to obtain the college textbooks. A total of 1,066 surveys were collected from three Mid-Western universities. Overall, the results conclude that the majority of students purchase their textbooks in campus bookstores or at bookstores located near campuses. With the rise of the Internet and familiarity students have with online purchasing, it was surprising that only 7% of the students surveyed indicated using an online source.

INTRODUCTION

One aspect of attending college for students is obtaining the required textbooks for each class as specified by the professor. The textbooks selected by professors or instructors are usually viewed as an integral element of the higher education process and often account for nearly 90% of the classroom instructions (Stein, Stuen, Carnine, & Long, 2001). However, acquiring the necessary course materials can put a financial burden on most college students as the price of textbooks has averaged a 6% annual increase since 1987 (Rabil, 2006). On average, an American student spends about \$900 per semester on textbooks and related course materials (Carbaugh & Ghosh, 2005). A recent study by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) revealed that textbook prices have increased twice as fast as the annual inflation rate, which has led to more financial issues for college students (Pollitz & Christie, 2006). These developments have spurred the passing of the Higher Education Opportunity Act, which requires publishers to share information about textbook prices with professors in addition to unbundling textbook packages (Grant, 2008). This Act enables students to purchase the textbook by itself, or just the supplements that would be used in the course. However, these requirements will not be enforced until 2010 (Mui & Kinzie, 2008).

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

A study by Krey, Clow, & Babin (2009) found that 96% of students purchase or rent the required textbook for a college. But, because of the high cost of new books, students are exploring more economical alternatives for obtaining textbooks. Those alternatives range from purchasing used or international editions, renting or sharing textbooks, and taking advantage of online versions. The shift to purchasing more used textbooks is verified by data that shows the sales of used textbooks have increased 15% annually while the sales of new books have only increased 5% on average (Mui & Kinzie, 2008).

The used textbook market is problematic for textbook publishers because the publisher receives no profit margin from the sale of used books and as a result authors receive no royalties. Because students are demanding used books to reduce their semester outlay of resources for attending college, bookstores are aggressively seeking used books rather than purchasing new books from the publishers. This results in publishers having lower overall unit sales of new books, which in turn forces them to increase prices to recoup their costs in producing the book. To combat the used textbook market, publishers are trying to increase their market share by offering new mediums (Mui & Kinzie, 2008). Online versions or e-books are designed to entice college students to continue to buy new textbooks while meeting the objective of lowering costs for students (Carlson, 2005).

Some research has suggested that freshmen are more likely to purchase new textbooks from the campus bookstore, while seniors start utilizing more economical sources (McNeill, 2007). However, not enough research has been done in this area to lead to any type of definitive conclusion. Further, no study has analyzed the extent to which students utilize different sources for obtaining textbooks. The purpose of this study is to identify the major sources for textbook purchases of college students and evaluate the possible effects of demographic variables, such as age, gender, and level of course.

METHODOLOGY

The sample for this study was derived from three different universities located in the Mid-South part of the United States. The universities were located in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee. The Louisiana university had an enrollment of approximately 8,500 students, the Mississippi university had 13,000 students, and the Tennessee university had 23,000 students. A total of 1,066 surveys were obtained through a convenience sampling from the three universities within each institution's college of business. Students in various business courses were asked to complete a questionnaire about their textbook purchases and usage. They were asked to answer the questions as it related to the course where the survey was being administered. Table 1 depicts the different courses where data were obtained and the corresponding number of surveys collected within each discipline.

Table 1
Surveyed Business Courses

Course/Discipline	Frequency	Percentage
Accounting/Finance	102	9.6%
Management/IS	308	28.9%
Marketing	440	41.3%
Quantitative Methods	215	20.2%
Total	1065	

The largest component of the sample was made up of students in marketing classes, at 41.3%. This bias was undoubtedly influenced by the authors being in the marketing discipline. The second largest discipline area was the management and MIS courses, 28.9%. Quantitative

methods courses made up 20.2% of the sample and accounting/finance courses were only 9.6% of the sample.

In addition to the different disciplines, the level at which the courses were taught was also obtained (See Table 2). More than half of all the surveyed courses were taught at the junior level with 54.1%, while 27.8% were taught at the senior level. Only 2.2% of the surveys were from a freshman level course and 15.9% from sophomore level courses.

Table 2
Level of Course

Level	Frequency	Percentage
Freshman	23	2.2%
Sophomore	106	15.9%
Junior	565	54.1%
Senior	291	27.8%

Respondents were asked for the demographic variables of gender, age, class level, and ethnicity. These data are in Table 3. The sample consisted of 53.4% females and 46.6% males. In terms of age, students between 18 and 22 years of age accounted for 68.3% of the sample. The student sample tended to be upperclassman with juniors accounting for 46.1% and seniors for 39.6%. Most of the sample was Caucasian, 73.4%, with the remaining 26.6% being minorities.

Table 3
Demographics

Variable	Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	563	53.4%
	Male	491	46.6%
Age	18-22	723	68.3%
	23-29	274	25.9%
	30+	61	5.8%
Class Level	Freshman/Sophomore	148	14.3%
	Junior	479	46.1%
	Senior	411	39.6%
Ethnicity	Caucasian	771	73.4%
	Minority	280	26.6%

The purpose of the survey was to determine the major source of textbook purchases by college students and to see if any demographic factor influenced the choice of location. College students were asked if they even purchased the textbook for their classes. The participants were then asked where they obtained the textbook. The original question provided ten different possible options. These were collapsed into five categories for analytical purposes: campus

bookstore, off-campus bookstore, online purchase, textbook rental, and purchase, borrow, or sharing of a book with another student.

RESULTS

Overall, 90.5% of the students did purchase or rent a textbook for their classes. Table 4 shows the location of these purchases. When a textbook was purchased, the majority of the participants, 64.2%, purchased the textbook at the campus bookstore, followed by an off-campus bookstore with 21.3%. Online purchases accounted for a total of 6.9%. Most online purchases were made from companies like Amazon.com (5.5%). Less than 1% of the books were purchased from the publisher’s Website. Approximately 5.3% purchased, shared, or borrowed the book from other students. The least common source for obtaining a textbook was renting the required book (0.6%).

Table 4
Where Purchased Textbook

Source	Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage
Campus Bookstore		623	64.2%
Off-Campus Bookstore		207	21.3%
Online Purchase	Online Publisher	9	0.9%
	Other Online	53	5.5%
	Hybrid (online/hard)	5	0.5%
Purchase, Borrow, Share with Students	Purchase from Student	15	1.5%
	Borrow from Student	28	2.9%
	Share with Student	9	0.9%
Rent Textbook		6	0.6%

A chi-square test was used to test for significant differences in where students purchased textbooks. Variables examined were the course where the survey was administered, the level of course where it was administered, and the demographic profile of the respondent, which included gender, age, class level, and ethnicity.

The type of business discipline influenced where students purchased their textbooks with a chi-square of 30.859 and a p-value of 0.002 (see Table 5). Overall, the campus bookstore was the most common response across all disciplines, but the source varied significantly among the disciplines. Whereas 83.2% of students within an accounting or finance class used this venue, only 59.6% of students enrolled in a marketing class utilized it. For purchasing books at the off-campus bookstore, the highest percentages were for marketing and quantitative methods, 25.1% and 24.3% respectively, and the lowest percentages were for accounting and finance courses, only 7.9%. Online purchases were the lowest for accounting and finance at 3%. For purchasing, borrowing, or sharing with other students the percentages ranged from 3.4% for quantitative methods courses to 7% for marketing courses. Only textbooks for marketing and quantitative methods courses were rented.

**Table 5
Business Disciplines**

Source	Acct/Fin	Mgmt/IS	Marketing	Quant Meth
Campus Bookstore	83.2%	68.7%	59.6%	62.6%
Off-Campus Bookstore	7.9%	19.8%	25.1%	24.3%
Online Purchase	3.0%	6.9%	7.5%	8.3%
Purchase, Borrow, Share with Students	5.9%	4.6%	7.0%	3.4%
Rent	0%	0%	0.8%	1.5%
$\chi^2 = 30.859$		$p = 0.002$		

For analytical purposes, the freshman and sophomore level courses were combined. The comparison between the level at which the course was taught and the source of textbooks revealed a significant difference ($\chi^2 = 14.228$, $p = 0.076$). The results are documented in Table 6. A higher percentage of books for senior level courses, 70.8%, were obtained through the campus bookstore, compared to junior and freshmen/sophomore level courses. For off-campus bookstores, the highest percentage was for junior level courses with 25.2%. Senior level courses were the lowest (15.9%). There appeared to be only a small difference among the three levels of courses for online purchasing and for books purchased, borrowed, or shared with another student. The renting option was highest for freshman and sophomore level courses at 1.1%, compared to 0.2% for junior level courses and 0.7% for senior level courses.

**Table 6
Level of Course**

Source	Fresh/Soph	Junior	Senior
Campus Bookstore	63.3%	62.1%	70.8%
Off-Campus Bookstore	22.8%	25.2%	15.9%
Online Purchase	8.3%	6.2%	8.1%
Purchase, Borrow, Share with Students	4.4%	6.4%	4.4%
Rent	1.1%	0.2%	0.7%
$\chi^2 = 14.228$		$p = 0.076$	

Respondent demographic variables examined were gender, age, class level, and ethnicity. No significant differences were found based on the person's gender. For age, significant differences were found and are reported in Table 7. The chi-square value was 14.281 with a p-value of 0.075. As age increased, the usage of the campus bookstore increased and the use of the off-campus bookstore declined. The percentage of students 30 and over who used the campus bookstore was 71.2% compared to 63.8% for the 18-22 year-olds. For the off-campus bookstore, the highest percentage was for 18-22 year-olds, 23.0%, and lowest for 30 and over at 18.6%. For the online sources, almost twice as many students ages 23-29 used online sources than either

their younger or older counterparts. For purchasing, renting or sharing with other students, the trend was just the reverse. The 23-29 age group was considerably lower than either of the other age groups. The option of renting textbooks was only evident for students 18 to 22.

Table 7
Age Variable

Source	18-22	23-29	30+
Campus Bookstore	63.8%	67.3%	71.2%
Off-Campus Bookstore	23.0%	19.2%	18.6%
Online Purchase	6.1%	10.6%	5.1%
Purchase, Borrow, Share with Students	6.2%	2.9%	5.1%
Rent	0.9%	0%	0%
$\chi^2 = 14.281$		$p = 0.075$	

While age was a significant factor, surprisingly, the student's class level was not. The chi-square value was 10.911 and p-value was 0.207. Whether the student was a freshman or a senior had no impact on where he or she purchased textbooks.

The last demographic variable examined was ethnicity, which was significantly different ($\chi^2=10.099$, $p = 0.039$). Results are shown in Table 8. Minorities tended to use the campus bookstore more than Caucasians, 71.1% to 62.7%. The off-campus bookstores were used slightly more by Caucasians, 22.3% to 20.1%. Online purchases were higher for Caucasians, 8.0% compared to 5.1%. The pattern was similar for purchasing, borrowing or sharing a book with another student. For Caucasians it was 6.1% and for minorities it was 3.1%. Only Caucasians rented textbooks.

Table 8
Ethnicity

Source	Caucasian	Minorities
Campus Bookstore	62.7%	71.1%
Off-Campus Bookstore	22.3%	20.1%
Online Purchase	8.0%	5.1%
Purchase, Borrow, Share with Students	6.1%	3.1%
Rent	0.9%	0%
$\chi^2 = 10.099$		$p = 0.039$

DISCUSSION

Every semester, college students crowd university bookstores to purchase the required textbooks for their classes. Other students go to bookstores located just off campus. Fewer students make the purchases over the Internet and fewer yet consider contacting other students or renting textbooks.

First, this study found that the overwhelming majority of college students obtain textbooks for their class. Slightly more than 90% of the students either purchased or found alternate access to textbooks. Only 9% of the sample indicated they did not have a textbook. The percentages may be different if general education courses had been used for the survey. Since almost all students surveyed were business majors and the questionnaire was distributed in business classes, the percentage may be greater than would be found among the college population as a whole.

In looking at the specific source, students generally tend to favor their local campus bookstore. Slightly over 64% of the respondents expressed that opinion in the survey. The second most popular source was off-campus bookstores, which accounted for another 21%. Combined, these two sources accounted for approximately 85.5% of all of the textbook purchases. While the percentages between the two varied some based on the business discipline, level of course, and examined demographic characteristics, students do overwhelmingly prefer purchasing textbooks from one of the bookstores, either on-campus or off-campus.

Further examination of these two sources reveals some interesting phenomena that will require additional research to determine the reason. First and most striking, the use of the campus bookstore appears to be directly related to the student's age while the use of the off-campus bookstore is inversely related to age. Older students tend to use the campus bookstore more than younger students and the off-campus bookstores less than younger students. One reason, although purely speculative, is that the older students may be taking only 1 or 2 classes, which may be at night or weekend, or may be an online or a blended course. They are working and have limited time. It is more convenient to stop at the campus bookstore. Also, they may not be familiar with the area and as a result, do not know where the off-campus bookstores are located.

More difficult to explain is why students in senior level courses use the campus bookstore more than students in freshman to junior level courses. Again, it is purely speculative, but convenience may be an important factor. The campus bookstore is convenient and makes it easy for students to purchase books while they are on campus and attending classes. Another reason might be that senior level courses are more degree specific and might be more difficult to get at any other location than the campus bookstore.

With the increased popularity of the Internet and the ease with which students purchase goods and services over the Internet, it was surprising that only 6.9% of all textbooks are purchased online. Most of these (5.5%) were purchased from vendors such as Amazon.com or other online vendors other than the publisher of the textbook. As students become acquainted with the college scene and purchase textbooks semester after semester, one would think that students would look for cheaper alternatives, which are certainly available online. Such was not the case. In terms of age, the highest use of the Internet for textbooks was among 23 to 29 year-olds and the lowest usage was for students 30 and over. In terms of level of course, students in freshman and sophomore courses used the Internet for textbook purchases slightly more than students in senior level courses and considerably more than students taking a junior level course. So exposure to the college scene and familiarity with purchasing textbooks did not drive students to the Internet.

When the source of other students, either purchasing from another student, borrowing the book from another student, or sharing with someone else is examined with the online purchases, an interesting phenomenon is seen. About 85% to 86% of the students purchase books from one of the two bookstores, another 13% to 14% use either online sources or another student; the remaining 1% rent the textbook. The percentages within each group vary based on the variable examined in this study, but the combined totals are very consistent.

This phenomenon is worth noting because of the press expressing concerns about the high cost of textbooks and student complaints about how much textbooks cost. Although more research needs to be conducted before any valid conclusions can be drawn, it is worth noting that for approximately 85% of the students, convenience is more important than price. Bookstores are more convenient since they are located either on campus or just off campus. Price appears to be the driving force for only about 15% of the students. These students use the Internet, work something out with a fellow student, or rent the book.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

More research needs to be conducted on this topic before any valid conclusions can be drawn because of limitations of this study. First, this study only surveyed students on three campuses, all in the Mid-West. More students, more universities, and a broader area need to be surveyed. Second, only business courses were considered. Patterns evident with these students may vary widely from students in the Arts, Sciences, Education, and other fields. Third, while this study looked at where students purchased books, it did not investigate why they made the purchases where they did. Fourth, this study only asked respondents about their buying behavior specific to one course. If questions were included or the questionnaire asked about buying habits overall, different results may have been obtained. Finally, additional or different analysis of the data may result in different findings. Logistic regression could be used that might provide more predictive results rather than just descriptive results.

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About the Authors:

Nina Krey is a graduate student at the University of Louisiana at Monroe. She graduated from the University of Louisiana at Monroe with an undergraduate marketing degree in 2008 and an MBA degree in 2009. She has published several articles at academic conferences.

Kenneth Clow is a professor in marketing and holds the Biedenharn Endowed Professor in Business in the College of Business Administration at the University of Louisiana at Monroe. He graduated from the University of Arkansas in 1992. He has served as an MBA Director and the Dean of the College of Business. Clow has published a total of 185 articles and textbooks. Current textbooks include the 4th edition of *Integrated Advertising, Promotions, and Marketing Communications*, 3rd edition of *Essentials of Marketing*, and 2nd edition of *Services Marketing*.

Laurie A. Babin is an associate professor in marketing in the College of Business Administration at the University of Louisiana at Monroe. She graduated from Louisiana State University in 1992. She was at The University of Southern Mississippi for sixteen years prior to her current position. Babin has published several articles in the *Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Psychology & Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Education*, *Business Ethics Quarterly*, *International Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, *Journal of Legal Studies in Business*, and *Journal of Promotion Management*.

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About the Authors:

John R. Tanner is a Professor in the Department of Business Systems, Analysis, and Technology at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and is the Melvin R. Boesch/Regents Professor of Business Administration. Dr. Tanner has published in such journals as *Omega*, *Journal of Management Information Systems*, *Information and Management*, *Journal of Computer Information Systems*, *Journal of Informatics Education Research*, and *Journal of Education for Business*.

Thomas C. Noser is a Professor of Economics at Western Kentucky University, specializing in the areas of statistics and statistical analysis, statistical process control, and microeconomics. Dr. Noser has published in such journals as *Land Economics*, *International Journal of Education Research*, *Journal of College Teaching & Learning*, *International Business and Economics Research Journal*, *Journal of Informatics Education Research*, *Research in Higher Education*, *Journal of Contemporary Business Issues*, *Business and Economic Review*, and *Journal of Business and Economic Research*.

Michael W. Totaro is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Business Systems, Analysis, and Technology and the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, teaching courses in database systems, business intelligence, computer networks, and systems analysis. Dr. Totaro has published in such journals as *International Journal of Education Research*, *Journal of Computer Information Systems*, *Journal of Informatics Education Research*, *Journal of Applied Business Research*, and *Review of Business Information Systems*.

Thanh-Ngoc Pham is a McNair Scholar with the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.