A survey on students’ attitudes, perceptions, and experiences regarding textbook costs, acquisition, and usage

Business and Economics Department: California University of Pennsylvania

Spring 2014

Prepared by
The Marketing, Communication, and Outreach Committee (MCOC):
Dr. Ismail Cole (Chair), Dr. Shirley Lazorchak, Dr. Edmund Matecki,
Dr. John Michaels, Dr. Clyde Roberts

Acknowledgement: The Committee is grateful to the CALU D2Learn Administrator, Dr. Jon Kallis, for assistance in resolving a number of structural and logistical problems for this survey.
# Contents

I. Background and Justification .............................................................................................................................................. 3  
II. Purpose of the project ...................................................................................................................................................... 5  
III. The Administration of the Survey .............................................................................................................................. 5  
III. Survey Results Highlights .............................................................................................................................................. 8  
V. Demographic characteristics ........................................................................................................................................ 9  
VI. Student access to textbook information ..................................................................................................................... 10  
VII. Measures to reduce costs .......................................................................................................................................... 12  
VIII. Students’ book-buying behavior and patterns ......................................................................................................... 12  
IX. Students’ perceptions of electronic textbooks .......................................................................................................... 14  
X. Student Comments ....................................................................................................................................................... 19  
XI. Recommendations ...................................................................................................................................................... 23  
XII. References ............................................................................................................................................................... 26
Background and Justification

College textbooks (and other instructional materials) prices have risen enormously over the years, taking a toll on student-parent budgets that are already stretched to the limit. Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau indicate that between 1978 and 2010, for example, the increase in the prices of textbooks (812%) was faster than the increase in tuition (559%), health care costs (575%), and new home prices (325%). According to estimates from the U.S. Government Accountability Office, textbooks costs a quarter of the average tuition for state universities and three-fourths the average tuition at community colleges. Not surprisingly, the alarming trend in textbook prices and its potential impact on higher education have drawn nationwide attention and raised many important concerns. One such concern is that the rising costs of textbooks and other learning materials will present a serious challenge to maintaining college access and affordability for students and their families (cf., U.S. General Accounting Office (2013)). This may eventually lead to fewer college graduates with implications for, among other things, the U.S. international economic competitiveness.

Also of concern is that the rising costs of textbooks and related materials are already having adverse consequences on the learning process and the ability of students to successfully complete their college degrees in a timely manner. This is evidenced, in part, by various student textbook surveys, including the current survey, reporting that the high costs are resulting in an increasing percentage of students (between 10% and 33%) who are not purchasing one or more required textbooks, not registering for a course, are withdrawing from a course, and are failing a
course (cf., 2010 Florida Student Textbook Survey). Thus, the high costs are having undesirable effects due to their impact on student selection of courses as well as the number of courses they take with ramifications for the successful and timely completion of their college degrees. These and other problems caused by the rapid rise in the costs of textbooks and other learning materials underscore the need for some practical solutions. However, there is growing concern that the solutions may be quite difficult to create due to powerful external forces and industry practices that combine to influence the rising prices of textbooks. These factors include consolidations in the textbook market resulting in fewer book publishers\(^1\); the methods by which textbooks are marketed, for example, instructors are provided with free copies of textbooks and related materials the actual costs of which are reflected in textbook prices; the release of new editions every 3 or 4 years, which have the effect of restricting the availability of less expensive used copies; and the roles of used-textbook wholesalers, and college bookstores. Despite the formidable challenges these factors present, however, educators and, more recently, state legislators, among others, are steadfastly looking for different ways to reduce the costs and to make education and instructional materials more affordable. The effectiveness of these cost-saving strategies will be enhanced if they are informed by survey results on students’ attitudes, perceptions, and experiences about the costs, acquisition, and use of textbooks and other instructional materials.

---

\(^1\) Five textbook companies account for over 80% of the $9 billion publishing market (Allen (2013)).
II. Purpose of the project

This project, consistent with a number of our strategic planning goals for 2012 to 2015, surveys undergraduate and graduate students in our business and economics courses to gather information about their experiences, attitudes, and perceptions regarding the above stated issues and the impact the rising costs are having on them and the learning process. It is hoped that the project will provide some recommendations on what strategies and guidelines the department and faculty may implement to help mitigate the effects of the rising costs on textbook and learning materials affordability. Additionally, this project will assist in our compliance with a federal law, the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2010, whose purpose is to ensure that students have access to affordable course materials by increasing transparency and disclosure regarding the “selection, purchase, sale and use of all course materials.” Finally, it is hoped that the data collected through this survey and their analysis will contribute to the growing literature on how to resolve the rising costs of textbooks and other course materials.

The Administration of the Survey

The survey was administered during the first two weeks of May, 2014. Our faculty solicited the voluntary participation of our students, and gave assurances that their responses will be anonymous and confidential, and that students’ grades will not be affected negatively as a result of not participating in the survey. The survey was web-based on Desire2Learn, which was set up to provide anonymous results. With the anonymity option activated, the responses to the
survey questions are available, but the system does not report who made what response. You also cannot inactivate the option once it has been activated. The University D2Learn Administrator, Dr. Jon Kallis, confirmed that the survey was, indeed, set up to provide anonymous results and, as stated earlier, he also assisted in resolving certain structural and logistical problems.

The target population was students enrolled in our department courses in spring 2014. The data collected were processed by the D2Learn System, and analyzed by the Marketing Committee members based on a division of labor that involved each member giving his / her take on the following:

(i) The specific issues students raised or are of concern to them regarding textbooks.
(ii) The rising costs of textbooks and how it is affecting the learning process (effects on student selection of courses and the number of courses taken, etc.).
(iii) The key messages or lessons that emerge from the responses, especially the written/expanded responses.
(iv) Recommendations as to what the department and faculty should do regarding the issues at hand.

The instrument consists of 37 questions plus a question regarding additional comments. A number of the students complained that the survey was too long, and suggested that some incentive should have been provided for completing the survey, such as offering several points towards the final class grade. Indeed, as one respondent commented:

“This survey was pretty long…. I suspect that some people who started this survey didn't complete it due to the length. I understand that all of this information might seem necessary and/or relevant to this project you're doing, but you probably decreased your participation percentage.”
Thus, not surprisingly, although 324 students accessed the survey and, at least, perused through it, only 84 completed all 37 questions, a decent outcome considering that similar surveys tend to run for a whole semester or two and, moreover, our two-week survey period coincided with the reading and final exam periods when “free time” is truly scarce for students. Also, although 84 students seem modest in absolute terms, it represents a 10% response rate, which is slightly higher than the national averages (5% to 8%) for such surveys (cf. Textbook Survey Report (2012) (Minnesota State University) and Textbook Survey (2012) Tarrant County College District)). More importantly, however, the students who completed the survey are representative of the Business and Economics department students in terms of age, gender, class standing, and other demographic characteristics.

The types of questions and issues covered in student textbook surveys are now standard and are part of a growing literature in the area (see, for example, Florida Student Textbook Survey (2010) and the Minnesota State University Textbook Survey Report (2012)). Many of the questions included in the current survey were extracted from this literature and, where needed, were modified and refined to suit our purposes. The questions fall into several categories:

(i) Demographic characteristics
(ii) Student access to textbook information
(iii) Students’ book-buying behavior and patterns
(iv) Student use of electronic books and course materials
The impact of textbook costs on students’ lifestyle and the learning process, and the cost-saving practices of our students

Survey Results Highlights

- Eighty-two percent of respondents are full-time students, 61% are female, and 46% of respondents have family incomes which are below the U.S. median household income of $53,000 in 2014.
- Sixty-five percent of respondents spend between $200 and $800 on textbooks in a semester.
- Fifty-eight percent of respondents purchased between 1 to 3 textbooks for the semester, while 27% purchase 4 to 7 textbooks.
- Fifty-one percent of respondents indicated that they prefer to get their textbooks after classes begin (to see whether the professor will be using much of the textbook), while 19% prefer to get them 2 to 4 weeks before classes begin.
- Ninety-two percent of respondents indicated that the costs of textbooks impact their ability to afford college.
- Sixty-three percent of respondents said the costs of textbooks impact their lifestyle by causing them to spend less money on living expenses such as food, entertainment, or rent.
- The cost of required textbooks has caused 57% of respondents not to purchase the textbook, 7% to withdraw from a course, and 7% not to register for a course.
- To reduce their textbook costs: 72% of respondents have rented textbooks, 59% have bought used books, 53% have sold used books to get cash to buy used or new books, 54% have shared books with classmates, and 40% have bought an electronic version of a textbook.
- Regarding the sources from which respondents receive any information on how to reduce textbook costs, 15% got it from the campus Bookstore, 28% from Faculty/Advisor, and 57% from other sources.
- Fifty-eight percent of respondents indicated that the information received on reducing textbook costs was helpful to them.
- Asked what sources respondents have used for their textbooks, 74% reported discount/used books online, 59% indicated the campus bookstore, and 39% bought used books from a friend/classmate.
- Almost 35% of respondents indicated they may purchase an electronic version of a textbook rather than a printed version for some of their courses if it saved them money, while 13% of them will do so for all of their courses.
• Eighty percent of respondents are not sure whether the campus library offers electronic textbook checkout.
• Regarding what they like about electronic textbooks, 48% of respondents mentioned cost, 45% mentioned convenience (can read anywhere), and 38% indicated ease of use (no heavy textbooks to carry).
• Regarding challenges they see with using e-textbooks, 62% of respondents indicated they like to write/highlight in their textbooks, and 56% are concerned about distractibility (eye strain/headaches, difficulty focusing, and not learning/disabled friendly).
• Thirty-one percent of respondents reported that they have frequently purchased a required textbook that was not used in the class, and 53% have had the experience occasionally.
• Seventy-two percent of respondents indicated they had purchased a “bundled” version of the textbook (with Access Code, workbooks, etc.) because no other option was available at the campus bookstore or elsewhere.
• Twenty-five percent of respondents reported that after they have purchased the “bundled” version of the textbook, their professors did not require the use of material that came bundled with the textbook, while 39% said this happens only sometimes.
• Many respondents offered comments on how expensive textbooks are at the campus bookstore compared to other sources.
• Many of the respondents suggest that professors be up front about whether or not the textbook is actually necessary for their courses in order to save students much needed money and financial aid.
• Many respondents also raised concern that, often, the material in the new and more expensive edition of the textbooks is not much different from that in the previous version.

V. Demographic characteristics

In terms of enrollment, 82% of respondents are full-time students, 16% are part-timers, and about 2% are overloaded students. Sixty-one percent of respondents are female. Respondents are almost evenly spread among the different class levels with graduate, senior, junior, sophomore, and freshman accounting for 24%, 28%, 23% 15%, and 10%, respectively. Forty-six percent of respondents’ family incomes are below the U.S. median household income of $53,000 in 2014.
VI. **Student access to textbook information**

Since students are interested in finding the lowest price on textbooks, it is crucial for them to have timely access to textbook information. Thus, the survey asked a number of related questions:

(i) How easy/difficult it is to find textbook information?

(ii) Where should textbook information be available?

(iii) Is information about textbooks available in a timely manner?

(iv) When do they prefer to get / purchase their textbooks?

(v) Do you have access on your campus/bookstore website to the ISBN numbers and other related information for textbooks?

Regarding (i) above, 23% of respondents reported that it was easy to find textbook information for their classes; 14% said it was somewhat easy; however, 21% said it was somewhat difficult, while the largest number (43%) indicate that it was very difficult finding the information.

When asked where the textbook information should be available, 83% said on the course syllabus; 71% said at the campus bookstore/website; and 50% on portable / e-services.

When asked whether information about textbooks is available to them on a timely basis to allow them to buy textbooks from sources other than the campus bookstore if they wish to do so, 55% of responses said yes, while 45% said no.
Asked whether they have accessed on campus/bookstore website to the ISBN numbers and other related information for textbooks, 58% answered yes, 8% said no, and 33% do not know.

Regarding when they prefer to get / purchase their textbooks, an alarming 51% said after classes begin to see whether the professor will be using much of the textbook; 19% said 2 to 4 weeks before classes begin; 19% said less than 2 weeks before classes begin; 14% said more than a month before classes begin, and 14% prefer it right after they register for a course.

**In your opinion, where should textbook information be available (choose all that apply)?**
VII. Measures to reduce costs

The majority of students take various measures to reduce their textbook costs. For example, 69% of them have bought used or new books online from sources other than the campus bookstore; 54% of students have sold used books to get cash to buy used or new books; 73% have rented textbooks; and 43% have used an old edition of a textbook. As a result of these measures, the majority of students spent between $200 and $800 on textbooks in the spring 2014 semester. Assuming these numbers hold for the fall 2014 semester, our students will spend between $400 and $1,200 on textbooks in the 2014 academic year, numbers consistent with those of similar surveys.

Also, as already stated, 43% of students have used an old edition of a textbook, while 6% of students have purchased from a pirate website. Only 1% of students have not adopted ways to reduce textbook costs and simply purchased the new textbook. Surprisingly, only 8% have used a reserve copy in the campus library. 48% buy an electronic version of the textbook where available, and 11% buying only the e-textbook chapters needed for the course. A disturbing 39% have not purchased the required textbook.

VIII. Students’ book-buying behavior and patterns

Respondents were asked about the specific sources from which they most frequently buy their books. Forty-five percent said they frequently purchased them from Amazon.com, while 30% and 22% purchased from Chegg.com and the campus bookstore, respectively. These
sources were chosen / preferred based on affordability (lower costs for used, rentals, and older editions), convenience, timeliness, and reliability. The majority of the respondents mentioned that Amazon.com and Chegg.com were chosen over the campus bookstore because the latter is too expensive.

The results of the current survey is in accord with those of other student textbook survey indicating that high-cost textbooks are negatively affecting the learning process and student lifestyle. Specifically, almost 37% of students reported that the high costs have greatly impacted their ability to afford college, while an almost equal percentage (36%) said it has done so somewhat, and 21% reported that the impact is slight. Only 9.5% of respondents indicated that the costs have not had a negative impact on their ability to afford college.

Regarding the learning process, 57% reported that they have not, at one point, purchased the required textbook because of the cost; only 7% said that the cost caused them not to register for the course, and 7% withdrew from the course because of the cost. Also, only 1% of respondents reported that the effects of the high costs caused them to fail the course.

The high cost of textbooks seems to be taking a toll on student lifestyle as well. Almost 64% reported that they are spending less money on living expenses such as food, entertainment or rent because of the cost of textbooks, and 37% are getting a job or working more hours for the same reason. The costs have prompted about 45% of respondents to increase student loans. Only 14% of respondents indicated that the costs do not impact their lifestyle.
IX. Students’ perceptions of electronic textbooks

The rising cost of hard-copy texts has generated much interest in using digital textbooks, which are expected to provide significant cost savings to both publishers and the students. Indeed, early on this interest prompted predictions from experts that the digital textbook will be the demise of the printed textbook (cf., Hilts (2001)). Yet, a recent study by the Book Industry Study Group (2013) indicate that despite the increased online and digital lifestyle of college students, only 6% of them are using “core digital textbooks” and, also, 61% of them have never purchased an e-textbook (Feldstein (2014)). These numbers naturally raise the question about why the adoption of e-textbooks has grown much less than expected. Among the factors explaining this must be students’ perceptions of digital textbooks, an understanding of which will help determine how much effort and resources should be devoted into e-textbooks by colleges and other interested parties. In particular, do students see e-textbooks as directly interchangeable with printed textbooks? More importantly, how willing are they to use e-textbooks, and what role can instructors and the school library play in enhancing e-book usage? These and related issues are addressed by the current survey.

Of the students surveyed, 26% have not used an electronic textbook. Regarding student willingness to use e-texts for their courses, 35% said they are willing to use e-texts for some of their courses, 13% said they would use them for all of their courses, and 33% said they may be willing to use them, while 4% are undecided on the issue. However, 18% reported that they would not use an e-text rather than a printed version even if it saved them money.
What sources have you used for your textbooks (choose all that apply)?

- Campus bookstore
- Discounted/used books online
- New books online
- Off-campus bookstores
- Bought used book from a friend/classmate
- From posted "for sale" flyers around campus
- Other
Also of interest are the devices that respondents have used to read electronic books. Although they have used a variety of devices, the majority (83%) used their laptops/computers; 26% have used their phones; 26% have used iPads and 6% have used Kindle. In terms of how they have accessed e-texts they have used, 88% had to log into the publisher’s website and 32% have obtained a downloadable copy.

Respondents who have used e-textbooks were asked about both their likes and dislikes in using them. Regarding the former, 47% and 45% indicated that e-texts are cost-saving and provide convenience (can be read anywhere), respectively; 38% like the ease of use (no heavy textbooks to carry); and 27% and 20% mentioned the ability to immediately connect with resources (web links) and to “interact” with course material, respectively.

**Would you purchase an electronic version of a textbook rather than a printed version if it saved you money?**

![Bar chart showing responses to the question](chart.png)
What do you like about electronic textbooks (choose all that apply)?

- I have not used e-textbooks
- Convenience (can read it anywhere)
- Easy to use (no heavy textbooks to carry)
- Cost
- Ability to immediately connect with resources (web links)
- Ability to “interact” with course material
What challenges do you see with using e-textbooks? (Choose all that apply)

- I like to write/highlight in my textbooks
- I need the internet to access any e-texts that I cannot download
- I have never used e-books/ I am unfamiliar with how they work
- I don’t have a laptop or tablet for reading e-texts
- I only have access to the internet at school (not at home)
- Distractibility (eye strain, headaches, impairs learning, not disable friendly)
About their dislikes for e-textbooks, respondents mentioned key challenges and concerns: 61% said they would like to write / highlight in their textbooks; 34% said they would need the internet to access any e-textbooks that they cannot download; while 56% are concerned about distractibility issues (eye strain/headaches, impairs learning, and not disabled friendly).

Crucial to the adoption of e-texts is the willingness of professors to allow their use. Respondents were asked how willing have their professors been to allow use of e-textbooks in the classroom. Seventeen percent said their professors are very willing; 22% said they are somewhat willing; while only 2% said they are not at all willing; but 28% said they don’t know or are not sure; 39% said it depends on the professor.

If the campus library is to play a key role in enhancing e-book usage, it is crucial that students be fully aware or informed of this role. Our survey results reveal a lack of awareness regarding, for example, whether the campus library offers e-textbook checkout. Specifically, 80% reported that they are not sure; 11% said the library does not offer the checkout, while 6% said it does but only limited titles.

X. Student Comments

Questions 12 and 23 of the survey invited respondents to add comments regarding why the sources from which they often buy their textbooks are preferred and whether they are satisfied with how they acquire their textbooks every semester, respectively. Question 38 asked them for any additional comments at the end of the survey. Almost all respondents offered some
The following selected comments are representative of the concerns and issues raised:

1. “The pricing is cheaper by usually a significant margin when compared even to the rental fees at the bookstore. For instance, one of my books last semester was rentable through the bookstore for around 80 dollars or so, I rented the same book on amazon for closer to 30.”

2. “It is a website that allows you to rent new or used textbooks in great condition at a huge fraction of the cost of a bookstore or new textbook. You can also use coupon codes and the shipping is very fast - you can get it the next day if you need to but it is normally about 3-5 days. They also give you a free box and free postage label so no costs there. I have rented books for $40 that would cost over $200 at the bookstore.”

3. “Preferred because it is on CALU web-site/ associated with the CALU bookstore.”

4. “I rent books and Amazon offers free 2 days shipping for students as well as prime membership 2 day shipping. Also, Amazon provides return shipping labels free of charge.”

5. “Cheaper books, more options for purchasing or renting. Campus bookstore has outrageous prices!”

6. “Yes to an extent. It would be easier if the ISBN numbers were listed alongside the books so as to take the guess work out of ordering my books. I have been lucky so far in guessing the correct books, but a few times I had to order via the book store for a significant price upgrade just because I couldn’t be certain I had found the correct version of the book needed for class elsewhere.”

7. “As mentioned on a previous question, I am satisfied by using online methods of getting books at a better rate than the campus bookstore. The biggest issue that I have is that the course listings do not always have the book listed for the course until very close (or after) the beginning of class. At that point, students are forced to obtain books in a quick (and more expensive) manner. I feel the biggest improvement the school can make is to make sure the book listings are available at time of class registration and that they are accurate. There have been a few cases in the past when I had to email a professor because the book was never listed with the course at registration time.”

8. “Yes, renting has made it cheaper, especially considering how few times I actually need the textbook for a course.”

9. “Yes, I am satisfied. I don't mind spending money on the books as long as they are used in the class.”

10. “No, it honestly makes me sick paying all that money for books that are rarely used if at all, and then getting $10 or less when letting the bookstore buy them back.”

11. “Yes, I am very satisfied. I refuse to pay bookstore prices when I can get the same book for half the cost. It is just somewhat harder to do that when I cannot get the book titles/ISBN's much ahead of time so I have time to purchase the book and wait for it to come in.”

12. “When I can rent them yes, if I have to buy them for a ridiculous price at the bookstore, no.”
13. “Not entirely, usually the cost is still way too much and I hardly even end up using the text at all. So I just lose out on money when I don't know if the class actually uses a book because after so many days the books are non-returnable for the same price at the bookstore, where I usually end up getting most of my books the first week of school.”

14. “No, they are insanely overpriced. The textbook market is super inflated and predatory. Especially if buying from a campus bookstore.”

15. “Sometimes books available for rent or used are sold out leaving students to only pay the maximum amount for a new one, or have to search online until they find one.”

16. “Not really, the expense is deplorable; education is expensive enough but then adding books make me dizzy sometimes.”

17. “Yes, even though I receive the book ISBN/title a bit too close to the start date for the semester, I am happy with my process of renting textbooks currently due to the savings.”

18. “No. I would rather the professors tell us ahead of time if we are going to actually use them or not.”

19. “Having to use the most up-to-date textbook every year is horribly expensive and I refuse to do it. Nobody tells students how they can save on textbooks by buying older editions from other places. I never have and never will buy a textbook from the campus bookstore. Only the rich and the naive purchase their books the bookstore, and I am neither. I will pirate my textbooks as much as possible if that means I am saving myself money.”

20. “This survey was pretty long. It wouldn't let me skip 19 or 21, so you should disregard those answers as they are irrelevant. For any of the "other" selections, you didn't give the option of typing anything. I suspect that some people who started this survey didn't complete it due to the length. I understand that all of this information might seem necessary and/or relevant to this project you're doing, but you probably decreased your participation percentage. However, I answered every question to the best of my ability because I know how it feels to have very few people participate in a survey.”

21. “I don’t mind both e-books and physical books. I honestly prefer to have physical books on hand as most of the e-books that the publishers give you are html books and very hard to navigate. I have seen many books that are easier to navigate before that are textbooks as well, so why the publisher website versions are this hard is deplorable. As mentioned in a previous question, I tend to order my books via amazon rental if the book is available. This coming semester I will also be buying my first book via amazon as well. The problem is, the discount I am getting on amazon is significant enough to justify going through them in order to save the money. I realize that the schools got to make money as well, and if the price discrepancy was not so large, I would be willing to pay slightly higher fees to get the books directly from the school. Alas though, when we are looking at nearly 30 dollars in saving on one book, I am going to go the cheaper route every time.”

22. “The cost of text books is way too high. It makes me mad when teacher says we need the book, I buy it, then we never used it.”

23. “I think over my 4 years here, I have used maybe 25% of the books I have actually bought/rented. It was a disappointment.”
24. “With how much the textbooks cost would rather the professors that won't be using them not actually list that a textbook is required. Due to not wanting to ship packages to my in town off campus housing I get my books in advance and by the time I find out I don't need the book it is too late to return it and I'm stuck with it. The only reason I still occasionally use the campus bookstore is so I can use financial aid, but I end up paying usually $400 more than I need to.”

25. “Professors should just be up front about whether or not the book is actually necessary in order to save students much needed money and financial aid.”

26. “The campus bookstore is there to make a profit. But I believe professors are there for the students. If at all possible, I would like the Business Dept to take the initiative to post required textbooks or send syllabi out early before the course begins so the students have enough time to purchase books from alternative sources. It would really eliminate stress and a lot more students might give it a try and save some money on the outrageous amount of student loans that are required for college these days.”

27. “The cost of textbooks has been going higher; therefore, I started to sell and/or rent textbooks to save money. Electronic books are hard to access and read to retain information. Also, since I am working on the computer all day, I have very hard time reading books on line because of eye strain. Renting the text books also poses the problem for me because now, after starting the MBA program that I have 6 years to complete, I understand that I have to take comprehensive exam. Specific chapters from specific books are listed to prepare for comp exam. Since I already sold first book I purchases and rented the other two, I am having a big problem on what I am going to do to prepare for the comp exam in two years. I do not know anybody in college that I could borrow the books from or to stop at the college and check the books from the library. That is posing a large problem to the point where I am considering to drop the program or going to another college to get the MBA.”

28. “The textbooks are way too expensive and leave students who cannot afford them to have to rely on finding them elsewhere and paying shipping or having to rely on a classmate or friend who might have the book. Most of the time when a student has to purchase a book it has to be the new one which is the most expensive, and then when they try to trade it back in they get less than 20% of what they paid because they come up with a new text book every year. Something has to be done.”

29. “The professors in the business department, though they are told otherwise, must keep in mind that demanding the newest version of the textbook is not practical and will drive business away from the campus bookstore. Since new versions of textbooks can simply be reordering the chapters and adding new words/sections here and there and don't impact the overall material the professor will go over, I recommend professors in all departments obtain an intimate knowledge of their textbook to explain the differences between past versions and the present one. Too many times have I asked a professor the difference between past versions of the textbook and the more recent one, and too many times have they told me "I don't know the difference, but you need to buy it" only to find out they don't use the textbook at all, or use very little of it. If professors can put themselves in the shoes of the poor college kid for a couple classes and see how the textbook will impact the course, and not listen to Cal U who forces all professors to require the newest versions of the book possible, courses will be better for it and the students will definitely appreciate the effort.”

30. “It would be very helpful if a copy (even an old copy) of the syllabus was available when registering for classes. I have had several professors who allow students to use older versions of textbooks, however this is only disclosed in the syllabus when it is usually too late as students have already purchased books.”

31. “Textbook costs are outrageous. Especially when they are purchased from the campus bookstore. For the sake
of the kids, as professors, they should tell all of their classes specifically whether or not they need a textbook. Nothing is more frustrating than spending hard earned money on a textbook and then never using it. Please pass along that all students would greatly appreciate knowing before or not long into a class whether or not a textbook is absolutely necessary.”

32. “Choose books that simplify the material in the best possible way. Yet, they have to be good at the same time

XI. Recommendations

As described earlier, there are a number of strong forces at work raising textbook costs. Despite these forces, however, the faculty can help control and reduce the costs in various ways. But any attempts to do so must be based on a meaningful commitment to the task and, furthermore, a full understanding of the fact that faculty textbook selection and adoption decisions will significantly affect the actual costs of textbooks to students.

The results of the current survey have revealed rich information on our students’ attitudes, perceptions, and experiences regarding textbook costs, acquisition, and usage. This information can, among other things, serve as the basis for developing our department / faculty textbook selection and adoption best practices guideline geared towards promoting textbook affordability. However, before presenting this guideline, some of the information is worth repeating. For example:

(i) **The availability of information:** it seems as though students are craving for information about their textbooks and in many cases are not getting it in a timely fashion. This has to do with both book usage and availability. Over and over students reported that they didn't use much of the textbook or didn't know specific information about the book prior to class. As professors, we can easily remedy this
by evaluating how and when we disseminate information. Do we send out a syllabus or textbook information to students 2 weeks before class starts? Do we include ISBN's? Do we make it clear how the textbook will be used in the class, both in the syllabus and during the course introduction? In other words, we need to make sure that we are clear about how the textbook will be used and its value to the students.

(ii) **Cost and e-books:** Students are very resourceful and are willing to seek out cheaper alternatives to the bookstore, including e-texts. It seems that around 80% of them are at least willing to explore the possibility of using an e-text. We can make the goal of obtaining a cheaper text easier in a couple of ways. First, we can provide information about websites like Amazon, Chegg, and Half where used/rentals are available, and let them know that these are good alternatives. This is easily done via the syllabus or during the course introduction. Second, we should have cost in mind when selecting the text. Selecting the "best" book or the easiest book for us is counterproductive if the students do not buy it. We should explore low cost alternatives, e-books, non-traditional publishers like Flat World, or at least make sure we understand and communicate what delivery options are available for the text, i.e. is an e-book version available, are older versions of the text adequate, etc.

**Some guidelines to promote textbook affordability:**

1. Faculty must make consideration of textbooks costs a key component of selecting course materials.
2. Faculty must send by e-mail textbook information on title, authors, publisher, edition, ISBN to students enrolled in their courses at least two weeks prior to the beginning of the semester. This will help students to better manage the costs of textbooks by comparison shopping about what, when, and where to purchase their textbooks.

3. Raise awareness: provide timely information to students regarding the options available for reducing costs such as Amazon and Chegg.

4. Faculty textbook usage: A sizeable percentage of students indicated that the required textbooks were not used in the class or for the course. The Department and Faculty must make sure that required texts are directly included in the instruction. One way to guarantee this is to be able to tell the students the pages in the textbook where the issues under discussion may be found. As some respondents suggested, professors must be up front about whether or not the textbooks are actually necessary for their courses in order to save students much needed money and financial aid.

5. To address some of the effects of the rising costs of textbooks (not purchasing required text, not registering for the course, withdrawing from the course) access and use of alternatively affordable options must be considered. As noted above, e-books must at least be given some consideration.

6. Provide format options: In selecting the required text, faculty should choose, where possible, texts for which both print and digital formats are available to students.

7. Make better use of the library’s Course Reserve System: The use of this system is potentially a very effective way of reducing textbook costs for students. Yet, the results indicate that this option is not being effectively exploited for the said purpose. Indeed, as already stated, only 8% of respondents have used reserve copies of textbooks at the library, a dismal number compared to the 87% library reserve usage number found in other student surveys (e.g., Schreiber, Ford, and Pownall (2008). The reasons for the low number may include simply the lack of awareness of students of the availability of this option, coupled with the fact that professors’ use of the system is much less than desirable. To begin with, Professors must become fully aware of the library’s Course Reserve System, e.g., the requirements for and how to place course materials on reserve. Also, it is recommended that professors place materials for each of their courses on reserve at the library before the start of the semester and, furthermore, communicate the availability of this option to their students (e.g., using their syllabi and making related announcements in class). A statement after the listing of the required textbook in the syllabus should read “A copy of the textbook is on reserve at the campus library.” Our department must also work with the campus library to establish ways that will make placing course materials on reserve a more convenient and time-saving process. For
example, placing the materials on reserve through an online form and then sending the materials by delivery. Also, for the library, when possible, to provide the digital formats of course materials on reserve.

8. Unless the faculty plans to use all items in bundled textbooks, the faculty must, where possible, select unbundled text material in order to lower cost.

9. Uniform textbook adoptions: Faculty should consider adopting a common textbook for multiple sections of the same course. This provides consistency of material coverage, reduces student course section selection based on textbook costs, and would have the positive impact of making more books available in the used-book market.

10. As long as there is current and adequate content material, faculty must use textbook for as long as possible (at least 3 years) and select the cheapest alternative. If not necessary, new textbooks need not be adopted immediately. If given adequate advanced notice, the bookstore may be able to find used copies in the following semester.

11. A relatively recent low-cost alternative to the high-cost textbook, and which was not covered in the current survey, and is beginning to receive much attention, is the Open Textbook:

   “Open textbooks are faculty-written and peer-reviewed like traditional textbooks, but they are published under an open license, meaning they are free online, free to download, and affordable in print” (http://www.uspirg.org/news/usp/survey-shows-students-opting-out-buying-high-cost-textbooks). Indications are that students are having a positive reaction to open textbooks. It is recommended that the Department take a close look at the possibility, feasibility, and related issues of open textbooks to determine the level of commitment that should be devoted to them.

12. Prompted by Student Comment #27 above, it is recommended that faculty members assigning specific chapters from specific textbooks for the Graduate Comprehensive Exams make sure that a copy of these textbooks be placed on reserve at the campus library. The students must be informed about this, perhaps by including a related statement in the study guides for the said exams.

XII. References


