

The Buy-In: A Qualitative Investigation of the Textbook Purchase Decision

Brendan Richard
University of Central Florida

Dean Cleavenger
University of Central Florida

Valerie A. Storey
University of Central Florida

Textbooks constitute a significant component of educational costs that many students are choosing to avoid. This study examines the student textbook purchase decision making process. Qualitative analyses of survey responses are employed to better understand the purchase decision process and the perceived value of educational materials. Our findings extend the literature by exposing the complex decision-making analysis that occurs. The implications of these findings are discussed as recommendations to instructors on improving textbook adoption amongst students. Instructors are encouraged to assess textbook adoption, assess the required textbook relative to supplemental material, and if necessary manage messaging to increased adoption rates.

INTRODUCTION

Thousands of highly qualified students are being priced out of a higher education ... it is important that we don't ignore the staggering costs of textbooks in the college cost equation, and the effect they have on a student's overall costs of higher education (U.S. Government, 2004, p. 2).

In 1965, Congress passed the Higher Education Act (HEA). The law was intended "to strengthen the educational resources of our colleges and universities and to provide financial assistance for students in postsecondary and higher education" (McCarthy, 2008, p. 1). The government endeavored to create an Act that would "ensure that every American student, striving for college education, regardless of financial status, had the opportunity to pursue his or her educational goals" (U.S. Government, 2004, p. 2). As a result of this legislation countless Americans have been able to obtain an education that might not have been otherwise possible. Unfortunately over the past few decades public revenue shortfalls in addition to greater institutional spending have resulted in substantial increases in college tuition (Cunningham, Wellman, Clinedinst, Merisotis & Dennis-Carrol, 2001). Textbook prices are also increasing at a rate higher than the Consumer Price Index. From 1951 to 1981 textbook costs quadrupled, and were predicted

to double again by 1990. In 2000 the National Association of College Bookstores (NACB) confirmed that from 1995 to 2000, a span of only five years, the wholesale price of college textbooks had risen nearly 40 percent (Pressler, 2004).

The United States Congress, recognizing the severity of the problem and the serious threat it represented to the ability of students to obtain an education, requested that the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) complete a report outlining the state of the price of textbooks. The report, released in 2004, came to the sobering conclusion that “in the last two decades, college textbook prices have increased at twice the rate of inflation but have followed close behind tuition increases. Increasing at an average of 6 percent per year, textbook prices nearly tripled from December 1986 to December 2004, while tuition and fees increased by 240 percent and overall inflation was 72 percent” (GAO, 2005, p. 2).

In part, these hearings were prompted by a report on textbook industry practices and their effect on the costs of college textbooks released by the California Student Public Interest Research Group. This report was based on data collected from student surveys across ten public colleges and universities across multiple states, including interviews with hundreds of faculty and students. The results indicated that both faculty and students perceive that textbooks are expensive and that these costs are growing significantly. Moreover, publishers’ “bundling” practices (adding additional materials to the purchase price of a textbook) and the excessive frequency of new editions were cited as major drivers of cost increases (Fairchild, 2004). Despite the volume of media attention, government investigations and academic research, little has been done to defray the growing cost of textbooks. As Muckenfuss (2011) notes “saving on textbooks is nothing new for college students, but a number of factors may be pushing the practice to new heights” (p. 1). The College Board reports that the national average annual cost for textbooks and course materials for four-year public colleges is \$1,168.

Though many report outrage at the growing cost of textbook materials, prices are continuing to rise, and it is having an effect on the way in which students make textbook purchase decisions. Students are, with a alarming frequency, opting to forego the purchase of required textbooks to defray costs. In 2006, the State Council of Higher Education in Virginia reported that about 40 percent of students did without some of the required books for at least one semester. This has been corroborated at the national level, where approximately 60 percent of college students choose not to buy all of their course materials (Dawkins, 2006).

The non-purchase or delayed purchase of required textbooks impacts the academic performance of the students, especially those who lack the resources to obtain the necessary information from alternative sources. Given the severity of this issue, this study seeks to explore the process the student undergoes in deciding whether or not to purchase a required textbook. Consideration is given to the amount of time it takes the student to decide, the factors that the student considers, the actual steps that are undertaken, and the perceived impact of this decision making process. The results are qualitatively analyzed and recommendations are provided to instructors to improve the textbook adoption rate.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students are increasingly questioning the need to purchase the required textbook for their courses and are actively seeking out alternative solutions. A 2010 University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey found that 78% of respondents claim they bought fewer books, bought cheaper books or read books on reserve to help minimize expenses (French, 2011). As a result of increasing textbook prices students are opting out of purchasing required textbooks and are instead searching for alternative access to the text materials, or taking courses without access to the course materials altogether. In one study, 70% of students reported not purchasing a textbook due to its price and 80% reported that they would do worse in a class without a personal copy of the textbook (Kaplan, 2011). This is heartbreaking as it implies that a majority of students enrolled in higher education who do not purchase their required textbooks do so with the perception that it will do harm to their academic performance. Though it seems clear that cost is a major driver of non-purchase, more research is needed to determine the precise nature of the antecedents and facilitating factors to the decision to not purchase a required textbook.

Access to Resources

Research has shown that an individual's resources, in addition to the utilization of interpersonal relationships are correlated with an individual's ability to access high-value contacts, and as a result obtain valuable career positions (Lin, Ensel & Vaughn, 1981). While initially your resources are determined primarily by your background, over time these are added to through educational and professional achievements. In the academic setting Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) argue that "supportive [connections] with institutional agents represent a necessary condition for engagement and advancement in the educational system and, ultimately, for success in the occupational structure" (p. 117). Institutional agents here are defined as family ties, individuals within community organizations, and teachers and counselors who can facilitate the transfer of resources and opportunities. Access to and the possession of resources are important to a student, especially one considering whether or not to purchase a required textbook. Resources open the door to alternative sources of information that might act as substitutes for the required textbook.

McLeod and Kessler (1990) explain the two types of resources that have been proposed as responsible for vulnerabilities for those individuals who have a low socioeconomic status. Lower status individuals frequently lack financial resources, disadvantaged because they experience undesirable financial events more frequently, in addition to in general possessing less financial resources (Liem & Liem, 1978). Individuals from a lower socio-economic status also lack coping resources, such as social support, and are integrated poorly into society (Myers, Lindenthal & Pepper, 1975). Does student's socioeconomic status influence their ability to learn the course material? It can be proposed that with less financial resources they are less likely to possess a copy of the required textbook, and in addition due to their lack of social support, likelier to possess a stronger negative correlation with academic performance, than those who have a higher socio-economic status.

The Purchase Decision-Making Process

John Dewey (1910) is credited as the first scholar to articulate a coherent process of consumer purchase decision-making. In his book "How We Think", Dewey outlines a five step process that consumers cognitively navigate as they make the purchase decision. Despite the plethora of alternative decision-making models in existence today, Dewey's 5 stage model remains the hallmark, the standard for analysis, and is included in most every consumer behavior text. Therefore, we have based our investigation on this widely accepted foundational theory.

Dewey's five stage model of consumer purchase decision-making include:

- 1) Problem/Need Recognition- Here consumers recognize the need or problem and identify the product or kind of product which would be required by the consumer.
- 2) Information Search- Consumers then searches for the goods or services that they believe may satisfy this need.
- 3) Evaluation of Alternatives - Consumers evaluate the goods/services they have identified as potential solutions to their problem to understand which product(s) would be most suitable.
- 4) Purchase- Consumers form an "intention to buy" based on their analysis of the quality of each alternative. Two external factors play a critical role in the purchase behavior 1) what peers of the consumer think of the product and 2) unforeseen circumstances such as financial losses.
- 5) Post Purchase Behavior-After the purchase, some consumers experience post purchase dissonance in which they feel that they have chosen the wrong alternative.

It is not difficult to imagine how this process is applicable and relatable to the decision-making process of a student deciding whether or not to purchase the required textbook. Students recognize that in order to attain a grade in-line with their expectations they must receive appropriate marks on assignments in the course. In order to receive those marks the student must acquire a certain amount of information and gain a certain level of understanding. Therefore the student needs to determine how best to acquire this information and understanding. The instructor most likely recommends purchasing the required textbook and attending classes, but the decision ultimately rests with the student.

The student will seek out information on the required textbook in order to try and determine whether or not it will ultimately satisfy their need for an acceptable grade in the course. The student will also most likely evaluate alternatives to purchasing the textbook such as sharing a textbook, or relying on the non-textbook course material. The students will also seek out recommendations from trusted sources to assist them in their decision-making process, such as online reviews or friends who have taken the course. Once the decision to purchase has been made the student must cope with the real-world factor of price. If the textbook at the retail price is beyond the means of the student, he or she will have to seek out alternatives.

The hypothetical situation described above is based on a direct application of Dewey's decision-making process to the purchase of a required textbook. Since this consumer purchase decision-making process is "rational" though, it is subject to a variety of biases. Quite often, consumers act in an irrational manner, favoring the use of heuristics (shortcuts) and/or unwittingly engage in bias decision-making. Given the context of our investigation, it is worth considering the following biases outlined by Simon (1976) and summarized by the researchers:

- Selective perception: In the search for evidence, consumers tend to identify facts that support their initial assessment of the alternatives and disregard facts that support other alternatives.
- Satisficing: This heuristic involving an early termination of search for the best alternative once a "satisfactory" alternative is identified.
- Conservatism of inertia: This bias occurs when a consumer is unwillingness to change thought and behavior patterns used in the past in the face of new circumstance that warrant doing so.
- Recency: Consumer may place more attention on more recent information and either ignore or forget more distant information.
- Source credibility bias: Consumers may reject something if we have a bias against the person, organization, or group to which the person belongs: We are inclined to accept a statement by someone we like.
- Underestimating uncertainty and the illusion of control – Consumers may tend to underestimate future uncertainty because they tend to believe that they have more control over events than they really do.
- Faulty generalizations - In order to simplify an extremely complex world, we tend to group things and people. These simplifying generalizations can bias decision making processes.
- Repetition bias - A willingness to believe what we have been told most often and by the greatest number of different of sources.

It is possible to imagine how a student who while undertaking the product purchase decision-making process, operating in a state of imperfect information, would be influenced by the biases noted above. With an exam approaching students might abandon the search for the best alternative to instead ensure a textbook is secured prior to the exam. Students who successfully completed prior courses without textbooks might allow this track record of success to cloud their judgment. Bolstered by past courses where "required" textbooks were pushed unnecessarily, students might doubt the credibility of the instructors claims in regard to whether or not the textbook is required.

As this study represents an exploration of the student's decision-making process, an investigation of the phenomenon of an unwillingness to purchase required textbooks, the researchers have decided to forgo formal hypothesis. Instead the researchers favor discovering key findings through an analysis of the data, guided by the rational process laid out by Dewey, complimented by the irrational biases that may influence the decision-making process.

METHODS

A qualitative survey was administered to students in junior level undergraduate management courses at a large public Southeastern U.S. university. Students were asked to complete the survey just prior to

their initial exams at the beginning of the semester, and were awarded extra credit for their participation in the study or for participating in an alternative assignment. It is estimated that the undergraduate juniors and seniors who took part in the survey had on average between five and seven semesters of higher education experience prior to the semester in which the survey was administered. This implies that in addition to the purchasing decision process for the current semester, the students have an additional five to seven experiences from which to base their responses in which they had to decide whether or not to purchase the required textbook.

Participants

Undergraduate students enrolled in a junior level management courses at a large public southeastern university were offered the opportunity to take part in the survey. Steps were taken in the survey documentation and consent form to ensure that the participants knew that their course grades would not be influenced by participation in the survey (outside of the automatic extra credit points received for participation). The sample by gender is approximately 60% male and 40% female, with an average age of 23 years old. A response rate of 62% was attained, with 126 survey requests, to which 78 responded and completed the survey in its entirety.

Measures

A semi-structured interview process was implemented through the use of an open-ended response qualitative survey. The survey was designed and administered to participants to: evaluate their textbook purchasing behavior, determine the choice of alternatives for acquiring access to text materials, identify the challenges faced in not purchasing a textbook, and better understand their feelings towards their professors, the university and the publishers. The survey itself was administered through Qualtrics, an online subscription based survey software program. All potential participants were provided with the survey link, from which they first had to agree to a consent form before beginning the survey.

Procedures

The survey responses were qualitatively analyzed by the researchers. Qualitative analysis is better able to provide answers to “why” questions: seeking to better understand students’ motivations, and “how” questions, seeking to better understand the process that students employ while making purchasing decisions. The primary purpose of this research was to better understand the students: thought processes, decision-making reasoning, and perceptions. The questions developed were divided up between two types: presupposition and grand tour. Presuppositions, approved by Glesne (2011) as a valid qualitative questioning technique, such as “have you...decided at some point not to purchase a required textbook? Why?” were supported by empirical research (Student PIRGs, 2011) that showed over 70% of college students (N = 1905) had at some point decided not to purchase a required textbook. In addition, students were informed prior to beginning the survey that should they disagree with the assumptions present in any question they were welcome to note in their response that the question was not applicable to them. Grand Tour questions were employed to better understand the underlying thought process employed by students in deciding how, when, where and why and how to purchase required textbooks. Grand Tour questions such as, “What is your thought process for deciding whether or not to purchase a textbook. What factors do you take into account when making the decision?” were employed. This was a beneficial question format because the research team didn’t wish to bias the question, lead the students to a specific response, or hinder or limit the student’s response in any way.

Responses by the participants were analyzed using document analysis techniques categorized by Grbich (2007). Content analysis was utilized because of its ability to systematically code and categorize responses for interpretation. The data analysis consisted of multiple levels of coding, grounded in the procedures set forth by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Miles and Huberman (1984), and conducted according to the six phases outlined by Bruan and Clarke (2006). First, the researchers became familiar with the responses, re-reading them individually. Next, free coding was conducted at the individual response level, resulting in select statements being associated with keywords. This resulted in the

organization of the data into meaningful groups (Miles and Huberman, 1984). Having identified keywords, a second reading was then conducted where keywords were reexamined across responses. Next, the researchers each sorted the different keywords into potential themes. Finally, the researchers collectively agreed to the identified themes which represented all keywords. Narrative analysis was also employed in order to exploit the story-like nature of select questions, for which content analysis alone would not have been the most appropriate analysis technique.

Ethical Issues

When conducting research that involves perceptions of purchasing decisions based in part on socio-economic status it is important not to make those participants from lower socio-economic backgrounds uncomfortable, to avoid incurring any mental distress. This has been recognized by the research team and addressed accordingly. The survey results are confidential, and participants were informed that responses on any question were voluntary. In addition, the survey itself was voluntary, provided as an extra credit opportunity, and per I.R.B. requirements, an alternate assignment was provided. Finally the survey itself addresses an issue that according to prior research (Student PIRGs, 2011) affects approximately over 70% of undergraduate students in the United States. The phenomenon is relatively wide-spread, and not isolated to a minority of students. As a result, it is likely that a discussion of textbook costs will be an outlet for frustration for the students, instead of a point of humiliation.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study are organized around the key questions that students were asked in order to stimulate discussion and obtain a broader understanding of their motivations and the process that they undergo in order to purchase a required textbook. The student's responses are viewed by the researchers through the lens of Dewey and his consumer purchase decision-making model (1910), in addition to the heuristics students might undertake in the purchase process.

When asked on the survey, "Have you, during your time here at [institution of higher education], decided at some point not to purchase a required textbook for a course? Why?" 18 students (out of 78) explicitly said that the required textbooks either were "too expensive" or "cost" too much. Furthermore several students noted that interestingly not only were the books too expensive, but in addition not worth the price. One student in his response noted that "I can buy a \$200 book and get an A or save that money and get a B+." Whether or not the investment of \$200 is worth the improvement in the student's grade, the end result will be a lesser level of learning for that student, and other students like him who decide that the return on investment on the required textbook doesn't warrant purchase.

Beyond noting that the price of the required textbook was too expensive, and that this was the primary reason for not purchasing the textbook, several students noted that the book was not necessary to obtain an acceptable grade in the course. 12 students out of 87 specifically used the word "necessary" in their description of why they choose not to purchase the required textbook. Responses were limited not just to the declaration of necessity though, in fact several students noted not only that the books were not needed – but that resources were available to them that alleviated the need for the textbook altogether. One such student wrote: "covered material in power point slides," another "enough material on webcourses," and yet another "the majority of the information needed is found in powerpoints or class notes." Clearly there is a sub-set of students who whether or not the textbook is too expensive, decide not to purchase because they believe that they can "go it alone" with only the supplemental information provided by the instructor such as: lecture notes, power points slides, and online materials.

In seeking to determine why students have decided not to purchase a required textbook we can begin to understand their decision-making process and the factors being considered by the students. Recognizing the need to receive satisfactory marks in a course, students sought out the products or services that would accommodate that need. While some perceive that the solution exists in the form of the required textbook, frequently others are questioning that need, and are instead evaluating the option of

acquiring the textbook material through alternative methods. Other students are potentially forced to seek out alternatives to the required textbook due based on a combination of its price and perceived value.

When asked the following question on the survey, “Walk me through the thought process for deciding whether or not to purchase a textbook? What factors do you take into account when making the decision?” predictably a large variety of responses were received. Each response told the unique story of how and why the student decided whether or not to purchase the required textbook. In analyzing and codifying the responses it became apparent that several categories of keywords were repeated frequently. A selection of these categories: Instructor input, verbal statements, syllabus, friends, first lecture, required, difficulty, online review sites, price, and delay. From a content analysis perspective the frequency with which these categories appears implies that several antecedents exist that factor into the decision to purchase the textbook. On its own this adds credibility to the notion that students are not making these decisions lightly, or quickly, or based solely on price. The story becomes even more complex, and interesting, when considered from a narrative analysis perspective.

When the responses to this question are viewed from a story perspective, of a causal nature, it can be seen that textbook prices are leading students to undergo a complex analysis of their situation. This analysis, in addition to being lengthy, is also structured as a series of checkpoints or milestones in the determination of whether or not the required textbook will be purchased. One student wrote:

I always go to class the first week before I even think about purchasing a textbook. If the textbook is needed the instructor will directly say that you need to purchase it. I also check online reviews from past students. They will usually state whether or not the textbook is a requirement. I will also then ask friends if they have taken that course. Once all of these outlets have been exhausted, I will then decide whether or not I will purchase it.

Here we can see that the participant has referenced several categories noted above. One determining factor for this student is clearly instructor input during and around the first lecture. The second determining factor is recommendations, which in this case come from online sources and the student's friends. This student takes both factors into consideration before deciding whether or not to purchase. Another student provides a detailed description of their purchase though process, with the inclusion of a casual component:

1) What does the syllabus say is required? 2) Does the professor strongly recommend it? 3) Do any of my friends or does the library have the textbook in the current or older editions that are 99% the same? 4) Go through the first two weeks of class without it and see how it goes. 5) If I feel comfortable without it then I do not buy it and if I feel like I will need it I buy or rent it.

Here we can see that the student completes her analysis, utilizing professor influenced factors such as instructor input and the syllabus, proceeding to make an initial non-committal decision as to the need for the book. At this point the student attempts to acquire the information without purchase, and if she is successful in acquiring the information, or if she feels like she won't need it – a purchase isn't made. If on the other hand she does not feel comfortable, at that point a purchase is made.

Several students in their narratives reinforce how important the initial assessment of the need for the textbook is, especially the input of the instructor and online reviews on whether or not to purchase the textbook. One student wrote, “I first determine the difficulty level of the course, I then look at the syllabus as well as online reviews of the class. I also note whether the professor finds the book helpful to students” while another in a similar statement detailed her initial decision-making process steps, “I wait till the first day of class to listen to what the professor has to say and then read online reviews that state whether other students felt the book was necessary in order to succeed in the class.” We can see the themes of instructor input, course difficulty, and 3rd party recommendations reinforced from the quotes

above. These themes make up the foundation – the initial analysis results – that form an initial perception of the need for the textbook.

When students were asked the question “How long does it normally take to make the decision whether or not to purchase a required textbook? What do you believe affects how long it takes to decide?” students overwhelmingly answered: “about a week,” or “after the first week of school,” or “a week into the class.” Overall amongst all responses the number of instances of the answer of approximately one week was 20. Only a handful of students noted that the purchase decision was immediate, regardless of the cost or value of the textbook: “One second. If it’s required I don’t wait,” and “no time.”

At this point in the decision process, with an initially formed opinion of the necessity of the required textbook, some of the students attempt to acquire the necessary textbook information from an alternative source.

I first look at the price then I look at what portion of the book plays in the tests. I factor in which of my friends is buying the book. / I try to either rent or borrow books from classmates...I knew that a textbook was required but it’s always so expensive so i usually rent from chegg, or borrow...My decision process in buying books is basically on the level of difficulty that particular class is, I will also check with friends to see if they have some of the books before I buy it and that will pretty much determine which books I buy. Last option is to ask my parents.

It is clear from the quote above that some students, after having determined that the book is necessary, attempt to minimize the cost of the textbook. In our survey responses the most common method employed was attempting to share the book or borrow it from a friend or colleague.

If from the student’s initial impression he determines that the textbook is required, but the student is not able to borrow the textbook, he will then have to undergo an evaluation of alternate methods to obtain the information. Here the story becomes more complicated as students consider dynamic information such as their ability to find a discounted price, their ability to locate a lower cost alternative (older edition, international version, rental), and the relation of the need for a given textbook versus the need for the textbooks for their other courses. It is at this point that the student, with their internal determination of the value of the textbook, conducts research to seek out an opportunity to purchase the textbook at or below the value they have assigned it. One student noted, “What affects the length of my decision is the amount of searching I have to do in order to find the books for cheaper whether it is through friends, ebay, amazon or a discounted book store.” Here it is important to note the amount of effort that goes into this search, in addition to the expansive list of sources the student queries in order to make the decision whether or not to purchase the required textbook.

For many students, having undergone this purchase decision-making process and determining that they need to purchase the required textbook, financial concerns become an impediment to purchase. After having recognized the need for the required textbook, conducted an information search, and considered alternatives, many students deemed it necessary to purchase the required textbook. In other words the student’s perceive that the textbook would in fact assist them in their ability to obtain a satisfactory grade in the course. It is at this intention to purchase stage though that several students noted their inability to fund the purchase, with statements such as, “If I have the money at the time,” and “If I have the funds for it,” and “get my finances in order and see whether or not the decision should be made to purchase the textbook.” Having enrolled in the course, undertaken the purchase decision-making process, and determined the need for the required textbook, it is unfortunate that many students were unable to make the purchase due to financial limitations.

Finally when students were asked “Have you encountered a situation when initially you intended not to purchase the book, but then changed your mind?” 46 students (58%) answered that yes they had been in that situation. This question sought to clarify the post-purchase behaviors of the students. In order to better understand the process that students went through a qualitative follow up question was asked, “Tell me about the situation, what made you change your mind?” One of the most interesting results was that 9

of the 46 students who had changed their minds did so because of unsatisfactory performance on a graded assignment. Specifically, the first exam. Student responses such as “after completing the first exam,” and “wasn’t necessary until I received my first exam grade” were common. This is naturally very troubling since it implies that a substantial percentage of students, who aren’t adequately learning the material are waiting at least several weeks into the class to begin learning material, and are now at a grade disadvantage relative to the students in the class who had acquired the textbook, or were more adept at operating successfully without it.

Relative to Dewey’s five stage model for consumer purchase decision-making the students sampled in this study clearly exhibited all five stages, although perhaps not always in the same order as Dewey proposed. Student’s recognized the need for the information that the textbook conveyed, sought out the most appropriate manner in which to acquire this information, sought out potential alternatives, formed an initial “intention to buy,” made a purchase influenced in part based on availability of funds, and finally conducted a post-purchase assessment. For those students who hadn’t purchased the required textbook, instead opting to acquire the information through alternative means, this post-purchase assessment typically came during or after the first major assignment of the semester.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

One of the primary methods in which instructors convey course information is through the use of a textbook, but significant barriers exist to student adoption. Instructors should be made aware of the phenomenon of lower levels of textbook adoption, and of the complex problem analysis that student’s conduct prior to making the initial textbook purchase decision. Students take into account the syllabus, the instructor’s messaging, the available supplemental resources, online reviews and friend’s inputs to determine the inherent value of the textbook. Once a value is determined, students go to great lengths (both in time and energy) to obtain the course information using alternative methods: through supplemental course materials, external resources, or not at all. In doing so, it appears that the students consider factors such as their ability to find a discounted price or lower cost alternatives (older edition, international version, or rental), the amount of funds available to them, and the relative value of one text vs. another.

Given that the primary motive of the instructor is to “educate”, a case can be made that instructors could be taking a more active, strategic role in this process. For instance, instructors can make a greater effort to inform students of the need for a textbook, the consequences of delaying textbook purchase, and the likelihood that the purchase will be forced upon them by poor academic performance, rather than preference.

Instructors, realizing that high textbook costs are a serious problem, one that is leading students to not purchase the required materials or delay purchasing the required materials, should assess their course. The following steps represent a step-by-step guide to instructors who wish to undertake a required textbook assessment (see Appendix). The first task (#1) is to determine how many students are avoiding textbook purchase, by employing surveys (optimally anonymously). The second task (#2) is determining if the textbook is required. Can the students perform well in the course based solely on the supplementary material, or will they truly face challenges without the textbook? If the answer is no, then the textbook isn’t required, and it should be relegated to “optional” status. If on the other hand the textbook is required (#2), and the adoption rate is low (#1), then the instructor should consider strategically influencing the decision process of the students considering whether or not to purchase the textbook.

The instructor can review her statements that she makes on the first day of class, she can review how the book is presented and referenced in the syllabus, and she can actively scan online sources for 3rd party assessments of her textbooks necessity. By conducting this assessment (#3) the instructor will better understand their contribution to the student’s decision making process. It is at this point that the instructor could revamp her efforts to do a better job of “pitching” the necessity of the required textbook to the students (#4). Actions could be taken to ensure that a strong, consistent message is repeatedly provided to

the students through online announcements, the syllabus, and the first week of class that collectively reinforce the necessity of the textbook.

If the textbook is required, and the instructor attempts but is unsuccessful in convincing the students of the necessity of the textbook (see Appendix), the last piece of the puzzle is cost. Instructors should realize the financial challenges that the students face, and understand that no matter how good the textbook, an un-purchased textbook is a missed opportunity to learn. If the adoption numbers are too low for their liking, even after employing the steps outlined above, the instructor should consider finding a way to lower the price: paperback, black and white, older edition, or perhaps a different book entirely.

CONCLUSIONS

Looking back on this study, the survey responses, the analyses and the findings it is clear that the decision-making process undertaken by students to determine whether or not to purchase the required textbook is alive and well. Not only are students undergoing this decision-making process, but they are doing so in a surprisingly well-thought-out and complex manner, investigating the problems, seeking out alternatives and analyzing the situation. Unbeknownst to the researchers prior to this study students are engaging in a long drawn out purchase decision-making process that encompasses all five stages of Dewey's model, and lasts at least one week after the start of the semester. It is crucial to note that most students reported making the "intention to buy" decision one week into the semester, which implies that it isn't until a later point in time that the students actually possess the required textbook.

While the objective of this study was to better understand the purchase decision-making process, with the results in hand, the researchers sought to provide recommendations to instructors with the intended goal of substantially reducing and/or eliminating the decision-making process entirely. The results of this study beg the philosophical and practical question of why a purchase decision-making process exists in the first place for a supposedly required textbook. It is a shame that a subset of the student population are forgoing a vital component of the learning experience. Having invested substantial time, energy and funding in order to register for the coursework, it is perhaps somewhat disappointing that a marginally smaller, but optional purchase, is potentially holding some students back from a higher level of academic achievement. It is the hope of the researchers that this study will act as a wakeup call to instructors to better assess their courses, and the level of textbook adoption, with the goal of improving the learning experience for both the instructors and students.

Limitations

Though we aspire to extend the prior findings on textbook purchase and utilization behaviors, there are limitations to our study. In terms of the internal validity of our study it is possible that the relationships proposed are weakened due to the cross-sectional nature of the study design, in addition to the reliance on a single source, and the potential for recall bias. In the future a longitudinal or multi-method study would possess a higher level of internal validity. In terms of external validity, the study can only be reasonably generalized to undergraduate business students in large Southeastern Universities in the United States. From a research design perspective, having distributed the survey only amongst the research team, it can now be seen that having provided it to additional friendly readers in the field would have been beneficial. Additional test piloting of the survey questions would potentially have resulted in a stronger set of questions, more able to evoke detailed, relevant responses from the participants.

Future Research

This study examined the textbook purchase and utilization habits of students in a junior level management course at a large southeastern university. One factor not examined in this study is the extent to which syllabi and instructor feedback encourage the purchase of course materials. In the sample focus group we conducted prior to undertaking this project, a vast majority of students indicated that purchasing a book is "optional" for many courses. Though most instructors do not list materials as optional, students tend to rely on one another for such information. The written requirements for the course in which this

study was conducted clearly stated that a textbook was essential to student success. Moreover, the instructor expended significant class time and was extremely persistent in his message to students that they must study the textbook. Future research could explore the interaction between the instructor and the student and how it affects the perception that the book is truly necessary for achievement in the course.

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APPENDIX

Guide to Assessing and Improving Textbook Adoption

1) Measure textbook adoption (through surveys) in your courses

2) Assess the value of the textbook relative to the overall course:

- To what extent is the textbook material overlapping with supplemental material?
- What % of the grade is allocated to textbook material not covered in other material?

*If adoption is low (#1) and material is exclusive (#2):

3) Assess the manner in which the textbook importance is being presented to the class:

- Review the syllabus
- How you are describing the necessity of the textbook in class the first week
- Online reviews

*If disconnect exists between the textbook importance (#2), and the messaging (#3):

4) Revise the messaging to better impart to the students the importance of the textbook.

- Highlight and repeat the required nature of the textbook in the syllabus
- In class the first week reinforce using strong language the necessity of the textbook
- Explain how online reviews are faulty, or how the course has changed