

Online or bookstore: the textbook dilemma

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The numbers are getting ever bigger. In 2006, Dr. James V. Koch reported for the Advisory Committee on Student Financial

Assistance that students would spend approximately \$1009 a year on textbooks. This, according to the Government Accountability Office, is the result of 23 years of inflating prices combined with accessory products such as CD-ROMs and web software. Students are forced to consider how to get the most for their precious dollars when shopping. Should they trust the campus bookstore, which conveniently orders the exact texts required by each professor? Should they trust the wide range of online sources with the promise of lower costs?

For the answers, let us review how some Penn State Harrisburg students found the textbooks for this semester.

Hannah Mohler is a communications major and a junior transfer from Harrisburg Area Community College. She said her book costs for the semester totaled around \$400. That is a \$100 dollar jump from her time at HACC but she suspects it has more to do with a concentration on her major than a change in schools. Her adage is "check online unless it's used" which meant her most expensive new book was an online purchase for \$192. She also said the extra "\$3 for two day shipping is well worth the money."

While Hannah seemed confident in her purchasing prowess, she may cringe to know what freshman Kari Paul spent without the Internet price checks. Kari went as late as August to shop for her books in the PSH bookstore. "My Mom paid for it," said the young woman. Though new to the textbook game, she managed to get roughly half her books used and half new at costs very similar to her junior counterpart. In other words, even though Hannah had experience searching online for better priced new books, Kari roughly matched her bill by simply finding used books at the campus store.

Benjamin Wigton took a similar route. A junior civil engineering student, he is currently enrolled in six classes for the semester with a textbook total of \$725. When asked why he did not go online to attempt cutting costs he had a simple answer: "The \$15-20 you save online isn't enough to compare in the convenience of the bookstore." However, he did add that he had shopped online in the past and would recommend it for the future. He trusts Amazon.com because "they are reliable... a good company with good service" and he has had good experience with them.

Vanessa Knight would disagree with Benjamin. A communications major with a similar class load, she said that Amazon was too expensive. Instead, she prefers Half.com and

its associated online stores where she was able to make a \$700 price tag into a \$400 one. Unfortunately, this came at another cost. She had to wait for online deliveries up to three weeks. This meant missing reading assignments and buying books from the bookstore that she would later return. As the bookstore only allows returns without a drop sheet for a limited time, this nearly cost her \$200 dollars for an extra textbook. Vanessa said that most professors are aware of this problem in students buying books online but admits "some give readings the first day." Her savings may have easily become more trouble than their worth.

Although the campus bookstore could not give an official comment at presstime, it would appear that it has remained viable competition for its online counterparts. Despite overhead, they usually meet an online price within \$20. Furthermore, the textbooks are those specifically ordered by the professors. There are no false advertisements or mismatched photos for its merchandise. Nearly all the online shopping students interviewed have danced around that disaster. Also, the bookstore has no shipping time. If it is the store, you may buy and read it immediately. This does not even factor in the ease of which the campus store will buy back used books for the next semester. An enticing, moneymaking prospect for the penny-pinching student. However, does this mean we should avoid going anywhere else for our textbooks? No. It simply means we must be clever in our hunt for the best deals.

Senior Sara Williams is a transfer student from Penn State Erie. With her psychology credits, Sara surely brought with her a unbeatable approach to finding her textbooks. Her book total for the semester came to a mere \$40. The feat was so impressive the interview quickly focused on her techniques. "A lot of times [professors] don't know how much the textbooks cost," she said. "But if you email them to see if they have an extra copy you can borrow or if an old edition is okay, it shows initiative and they like that." Her books, many of them an older edition, were found used through Amazon for \$1. Apparently, the student sellers

are "just eager to get anything for an out of date book." Sara also recommends checking any library for reserves or texts and renewing them all semester. According to her, most people will overlook this option. This amounts to Ms. Williams getting a projected estimated savings of \$460 for the semester. That is money well saved.

It would appear that shopping online or on campus will carry its own advantages and disadvantages for you to way. There are savings to be found in dollars, time, and frustration that you will have to count for yourself. One just has to realize that there are multiple options even beyond the brick-and-mortar and the digital shelves.

Online options



Photo courtesy of Maketextbooksaffordable.org

amazon.com[®]

Photo courtesy of Amazon.com

half.com
an **ebay** company

Photo courtesy of Half.com



Campus Book Swap

Photo courtesy of Campusbookswap.com



Photo courtesy of Chegg.com

The Public Internet Research Group (PIRGS) is dedicated to finding the reasons behind high textbook costs and how to promote solutions. Be sure to read their news releases. "Five Ways to Save on Textbooks Now, Three Ways to Lower Price" is One headline that delivers on its promise.

Although some may avoid the site, it still offers a its own products as-well-as those of smaller businesses. It is a great way to find the comparative price of a textbook before heading to the bookstore. Amazon has also offered free trials of premium services for free shipping and discounts on textbook orders. Just be sure to cancel the service before you are charged if you decide it is not for you.

Like Amazon, it is an excellent place to get a sense of book prices. For better service, always check the rating of a seller and its location. A book can ship faster from New York than it can from Seattle.

Started by students for students, it gives many an opportunity to trade textbooks between semesters at no cost.

If you like the idea of renting a textbook instead of owning, this service functions like Netflix in that you create a list of books and pay a subscription fee. At the end of the semester, the student drops the books in a prepaid envelope and sends them back to the loaner.