

High price tags on college textbooks

[Education](#), [Learning](#)



Broke and Hungry: The Unforgiving Cost of College Textbooks

As I log on to check my bank account online, my heart sinks and my hands shake. After paying for three classes at \$313 apiece and my rent, I know it is probably a very sad day for my waning checking account. As it loads, I hope for the best but expect the worse. Finally, numbers appear on the screen and I can't help but sit down in the chair and cry. I know how much books for class cost, and it is all I have left. There's no chance of not getting them, and I haven't been able to find them elsewhere for cheaper, so there goes my last dollar. I even gave up taking a fourth class to be able to pay for the books for the other three. Alas, my checking and savings were still completely wiped out. Unfortunately, all of this was due the same week I had intended to go grocery shopping so it seems as though I am going to be stuck living off of ramen and crackers for the next two weeks, let's hear it for proper nutrition. The life of a student, I suppose, but why should it have to be? The cost of textbooks has done nothing but go up in the last three decades, rising faster than the rate of inflation. According to College Board, the average full-time undergraduate student at a four-year public college spends about \$1, 298 per year. So that's \$650 per semester, if you're not taking summer courses, or \$5, 200 over the course of a 4-year degree. At Seminole State, that's the cost of sixteen classes. That would pay my rent for six months, but instead I have to throw that money away on overpriced books. The cost of textbooks may not be the biggest issue in higher education, but it is still a problem that affects students every day. The system is flawed and is in dire need of a change.

Teachers often pick books without considering the price, looking instead at the content of the book and how well it will fit their teaching style or course. They may not even have more than two choices, or no choice at all. As students, we have zero choice. You walk into the bookstore and there is the book or two required for class, take it or leave it. If you choose not to purchase the book, there is no sympathy from teachers and there's a high possibility of failing the class. Some students even pick classes based on how expensive the books are. Even if you have financial aid, if your books are high in cost that can use up a very large chunk of the money you receive and you may end up still having to take money out of your own pocket. In their eye-opening essay, "Should Everybody Go To College?", Stephanie Owen and Isabel Sawhill make the case that while college is a wonderful tool, it's definitely not right for everybody. They state that, "Furthermore, we have to factor in the opportunity cost of college, measured as the foregone earnings a student gives up when he or she leaves or delays entering the workforce in order to attend school" (210). I'm sure this hits close to home for many students out there, including myself. If you're not starting college straight out of high school, chances are you're working a part or full-time job at the same time as pursuing your educational goals. By taking one or two days off to attend classes, you are losing out on hundreds or thousands of dollars, while money is still coming out of your pocket at the same regular intervals to pay bills, buy food, acquire school supplies, provide transportation, etc. For the students who take out loans, this could even cause them to fall further into debt by borrowing more money to make up for the loss of income. According to a report from the U. S. PIRG Education Fund and

Student PIRGs, a whopping 65 percent of students said they didn't buy a required textbook because they considered them to be far too expensive, even though 94 percent of the same group were concerned that it would hurt their grade.

To understand why textbooks cost as much as they do, let's first take a look at how they are created. The author writes the book and then presents it to a publisher. Currently, there are four main publishers in the textbook industry: Pearson, McGraw-Hill, Reed Elsevier, and Houghton Mifflin. These companies run the industry and have bought out or merged with all the minor players, the little companies and publishing houses that once existed. We shall come back to companies later, and for now focus on the process itself. Once it has been decided that the book will go to print, it takes about a year until completion. The publishing company will send out samples of books to schools and teachers, with the hopes that they will adopt it. Once it is chosen, the college bookstore looks at how many teachers are using said book and how many students will take the class and they place their order with the publisher. Now we get down to where the money goes: Say a book is \$120 at the school's bookstore. The book was sold to the bookstore from the publisher at \$100 a book. The author usually gets about 10% of the amount the publisher sells each book for, so in this case it's \$10 per book. The publisher pays for materials such as paper, binding, ink, the cost of running a website for the book if there is one, paying the editors of the book and for the marketing. Now, there are instances where this cost goes up, such as the cost of paying for the copyright of large anthologies, given you have to pay a fee to every author in the book, but generally, the cost doesn't

rise or fall greatly if you're producing a substantial quantity of the same book. If you break it down per textbook, this is approximately \$10 per book. So, the publisher makes \$80 for each of these textbooks sold. That's quite a profit if you consider the amount students spend yearly on textbooks. The cost of production is nowhere near the cost of the book itself and this is outrageous and unacceptable. We're not paying for the quality of text; we're pouring money directly into the publisher's pockets. Not only do they charge excessive amounts for the books themselves, they then tack on additional costs for ad-on products that students generally don't even use. According to Tim Goral in his article, "Open textbooks aim to cut college costs", there are many tricks publishers use to do this. He says that, "Students and faculty have complained for years that publishers have sought to increase their profits by issuing superficially revised editions of texts, or packaging them with supplemental materials, such as CDs and DVDs, that often go unused (10)." I absolutely agree with this and these are only a few of the added materials I've seen. There are also workbooks that aren't even required for class, codes for the digital copy of the books (why do we need this if we just purchased the hard copy?), and in some cases codes to online labs that you could absolutely access for free or buy for cheaper through the actual website. It's appalling to have to spend great deals of money on things you actually need, let alone on things you don't need at all.

The fact that there really are these four publishing companies illustrates the main flaw in the publishing system. If there are only four companies producing textbooks, there is very little choice in what to choose from in each subject. There are more choices when teaching a bigger, well-known

class such as basic English and Mathematics, but when you get down to specialized subjects such as Quantum Physics or the Sociology of Deviance, there are one or two options.

In Gilbert Sewall's article, "Textbook Publishing", he does a wonderful job explaining why smaller companies are having a hard time staying afloat:

Why are there so few alternatives to the textbooks produced by these giants? Entry barriers to educational publishing are formidable. At every stage of production, from paper to printing, economies of scale favor mammoth enterprises. States and many local districts require publishers to post performance bonds, provide free samples, maintain textbook depositories, and field teachers' consultants. Aggressive sales forces often build tight relationships with district-level textbook purchasers that become habitual over time. Any company that plans to compete nationally in school publishing must be capital intensive and "full service," that is, it must offer study guides, workbooks, and technology, along with discounts, premiums, and an array of teacher enticements. In some states, including California and Texas, Spanish versions of texts, as well as teachers' editions, binders, and answer keys may determine which books are adopted. (498)

So, the bigger these four companies get, the harder it is for newer, smaller companies to emerge, unless they already have a budget that is close in size to Pearson or McGraw-Hill. Without the budget to supply these extras perks for teachers, the smaller companies fall short and eventually disappear. It's unfortunate that these extras are incentive enough to exploit already struggling college students. This goes back to the teachers not necessarily

knowing how much the books cost, or caring, they simply chose the book that's in front of them that fits their needs and these big companies can charge whatever they want per book because they know as students, we have no choice but to pay the high price tag or risk failing.

So, what other options are there for avoiding these high price tags on college textbooks? Many people argue that used books or renting of the required books is the way to go. This is a wonderful suggestion, if they are available for either, which I have found to rarely be the case. In my three years of experience, I have been able to find one of my books for rent once and it was only about half the cost of buying, \$25, if I recall correctly. As a girl who goes to the bookstore under the public library and gets hard backs for a dollar, it's hard for me to shell out that kind of cash for a book. Although \$25 is, of course, better than \$50, it's still outrageous for a book you're going to use for three months and give back. The library rents out books for free, so why do I have to pay at all? Used books generally go in the same direction. While they are cheaper than new books, they are still not cheap. Of the ones I have found, the savings seem to be anywhere from ten to thirty dollars, depending on the condition and book. Used books are also often scarce; if the teacher just adopted the book, there will be none available at the bookstore and of the online venues I have perused, there are generally very few of most books (aside from mathematics) and they go very quickly.

Then buy new and sell it back, they say. While this is true, it's also quite risky, as there is no guarantee that the book store will buy your book back. The problem of new editions arises quite often, or the teacher can decide

they didn't like the book so much and choose a new one for the upcoming semester, leaving the book you have worthless. You could try selling it online. I have had many friends find success with this, but it also depends on the book you have. If it's a \$300 Anatomy book, you have greater luck on seeing the return of your money. Many of the sites take a cut of what you make. Though not a huge cut, when coupled with the cost of shipping the book yourself, you don't really make too much of your money back. Not to mention the fact that you are still out that money in the meantime, which can set some people back a lot. Especially if it is a \$300 book. That's the cost of an entire class at Seminole State College, or the cost of a month's car payment.

Publishers actually only make money off of new books and make nothing off of used books. When school bookstores buy books back from students and then re-sell them, they keep all of the profit. Of course publishers would want to keep producing new editions in order to stop this from happening and gaining more money for themselves. College bookstores take a large monetary risk by buying back books from students. If a new edition comes out before they sell all of the used books, they become useless and they lose all the money they spent on them. Editions generally last 2-4 years, which really isn't a long time at all, and is terribly unnecessary unless it's a computer-based technology class where the information available really does change that fast and calls for new prints. When the phrase ' Digital books' first started to circulate, it caused a steady level of excitement. These had to be cheaper and easier than our hard copy textbooks, right? How wrong we were. They can, in fact, be cheaper by a small amount, but even

this comes with a price. In Abby Clobridge's article, "Libraries, meet open textbooks", she explains this price perfectly.

For instance, Gregory Mankiw's Principles of Economics, a staple textbook used in Introduction to Economics classes around the world, comes with a nearly \$300 price tag for the current edition. Today's list price on Amazon: \$279 to buy a new print copy, \$289 to buy a new electronic copy for a Kindle (yes, that's \$10 more for a "print replica" electronic version), or it is available as an electronic rental for \$117. Plus, according to the Amazon listing, "Important Notice: Media content referenced within the product description or the product text may not be available in the ebook version." Amazon also kindly notes that the book is sold by Cengage Learning and that the price was set by the publisher, just in case you wanted to blame Amazon for those prices. (68)

This is what I have noticed in my research as well, and it's outrageous that digital copies can cost even more than the books themselves when you're getting less. The notice she mentions is not uncommon; they may be lacking in the sense that some of the information or lessons printed in the hard copy may not find themselves in the digital copy, or you are not allowed to access the book indefinitely, or you can only access it on one device as opposed to your computer, tablet and e-reader, as you would be able to with a regularly purchased digital book. The rental price for the digital copy is also absolutely absurd.

Used books are helpful but not a perfect solution and digital books are no better. So what does this leave us with? Open textbooks. Open textbooks are

a wonderful creation: quality college textbooks with an open copyright license. This means that the books are open for anyone to access, share, edit, or print at little or no cost. This does not lessen the quality of the book in any way; they are still written and reviewed by experts in each given field, but it gives professors the ability to perfectly manipulate a textbook by adding or removing portions of the book to fit the needs of each class. This seems like a win-win, without a doubt, for students and teachers alike. So why are more schools not using these wonderful books? Alisha Azvedo illustrates the issues faced when trying to create such open textbooks, including funding and the hardships of trying to have them adopted by teachers in her article, “ Can Textbooks Ever Really Be Free?”. In her words:

Providing college students with free textbooks is no easy task

That seems to be the major lesson from several efforts to produce e-books that are low-cost or free to help reduce students’ costs. Money pressures, slow adoption by professors, and quality concerns stand in the way as these projects hope to rival traditional publishing. Producing free textbooks may sound like a good idea, but it’s turning out to be easier said than done. “ It’s like the college library,” said Tim Tirrell, director of partnerships and strategic planning for Merlot, a free online resource for college learning materials supported chiefly by the California State University system. “ Everybody agrees that it should be there-it should be free to access and free to everyone. But somewhere behind the scenes, you need a sustainable business model and partners. (Azvedo)

What she says is saddening and not unbelievable. Money pressures are understandable; nobody wants to offer their writing services or editing

<https://assignbuster.com/high-price-tags-on-college-textbooks/>

services or time for free when the larger publishing companies will pay top dollar for such things. Adoption by professors is less understandable. I've had a few teachers tell me secrets to saving money on textbooks for their classes, you'd think they would take a step farther and chose the best option for their students. As for the quality, the information in the open textbooks is still reviewed by experts just as trustworthy as those who review the textbooks of big name publishers, and you can edit the text yourself to remove anything you deem unfit or that doesn't fit your lesson plan. For students, the savings would be substantial. If you had one class that used an open textbook, you could potentially save \$100 or more every semester. It may not seem like a lot, but if you're already struggling it is the difference between going grocery shopping that semester or living off of cream cheese and crackers. The most successful company in producing open textbooks is OpenStax College, a non-profit organization founded in 2012 and based out of Rice University in Texas. OpenStax currently offers eighteen open textbooks online, completely free. The project acquired substantial backing from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett, the 20 Million Minds Foundation and the Maxfield Foundation, proving that there is more than enough support for this cause and donors willing to put money into making education easier for students.

A few colleges and professors have taken to this idea of open textbooks quite well but it's shocking how low the number is. If new textbooks are outrageously priced, used textbooks are hard to find and not much cheaper, and digital books are unstable in cost and content, what's a struggling college student to do? Coupled with the opportunity cost of taking extra days

off of work for school, it's a hard financial decision. If open textbooks were integrated more fully into colleges, there would be little to no cost. The issue surrounding the cost of textbooks would be no more. All we can do now is hope this occurs one day in the near future.