

Textbook Spending Continues Slow Decline

Survey finds the amount students spend on course materials each year has decreased, possibly indicating students are increasingly utilizing open-source material and other educational resources.

By [Nick Hazelrigg](#)

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Keeping in line with recent trends over the last couple of years, spending on course materials such as textbooks decreased 14 percent in the last year, an annual survey of students finds. A separate study of internal prices of one textbook retailer found that prices had decreased 26 percent in the last year. According to the [survey](#) of more than 20,000 students across 41 institutions conducted by the National Association of College Stores, students on average spent \$415 on course materials in the 2018-19 academic year, down from

\$484 last year. Student spending has declined almost every year in the last decade -- in 2008 students spent an average of \$700 on course materials.

Richard Hershman, vice president of government relations at NACS, said this decline is the result of attempts within the college stores industry to make materials more affordable.

The survey found that the numbers on purchasing and renting have remained the same since 2014, with 83 percent saying they had purchased a textbook, 44 percent saying they had rented one and 15 percent saying they had borrowed one.

“Since 2008 spending has declined 41 percent,” Hershman said in a news release. “It is clear that many of the affordability solutions developed over the past 10 years by campus stores, the broader industry and postsecondary institutions have led to substantial savings.”

An internal survey conducted by the textbook retailer Campusbooks.com found the company’s average textbook prices had fallen 26 percent in the last two years. In a [news release](#), the company’s CEO, Alex Neal, cited the proliferation of rental textbooks as the reason for the decline.

“The college textbook price decrease is primarily due to the increase of rentals, which are typically less expensive -- a large factor for students who are often taking out student loans as a result of increased tuition costs,” said Neal. “Textbook rentals have nearly doubled in the last three years due to widespread awareness and acceptance, and there are more books available to rent.”

However, Hershman said, the continued use of online access codes in textbooks sometimes make rentals less cost-effective, and his data were unable to substantiate the claim that rentals have increased.

"We have seen rentals remain pretty steady, at least since 2014," Hershman said. "If we go back to 2013, we've seen an increase of nine percentage points. Historically rental programs priced new and used rentals the same way, but overtime they started charging less for used rentals -- that is part because publishers include access codes with many new books, but once the code is used by one student, it no longer works. So if a student rented a used rental, they may still need to buy the access code separately."

Nicole Allen, director of open education at the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition, said the results are consistent with recent trends in the pricing of course materials.

The NACS survey also found that 89 percent of students said they had downloaded some kind of free material, whether it was part of open-resources material in a specific class, free content online or illegally obtained material. Allen said the increased use of open educational resources has played a role in the changes in the textbook marketplace over the last decade.

"One of the effects of high costs of textbooks is that it has started conversations on campus about the limitations of traditional textbooks and created opportunities for faculty to tailor more of their material to their course or even go beyond textbooks to other collections of resources," Allen said. The changing role of libraries has possibly contributed to lower student spending, Allen said.

“Libraries have gotten a lot more engaged in conversations around course materials,” Allen said. “They’ve been working with faculty to help get students access to academic materials.”

Allen said while increases in opportunities like this should be celebrated, decreased spending on textbooks could mean students aren’t buying all of their course materials due to expenses, which wouldn’t be an answer to the problem.

“One of the problems with surveys that look at spending is they don’t answer the question of why,” said Allen. “The good reasons are that students are able to shop around for more affordable options -- in some cases digital textbooks and the rise of open educational resources is helping more students get access to their materials or a very low cost. But just because the problem is getting better doesn’t mean it’s getting solved.”

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https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/07/25/spending-and-costs-textbooks-continue-decrease-according-surveys?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=c9014fd456-DNU_2019_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-c9014fd456-200040001&mc_cid=c9014fd456&mc_eid=20a6b0e480