

Restoring Students' Perceived Value of Course Materials

How professors view the importance of their assigned course materials doesn't always match students' perceptions. In fact, students may not purchase required materials at all. Why is that? And what can professors do to increase the perceived importance of course materials?

The Chronicle of Higher Education says that the amount that college students spend on course materials appears to be decreasing. That sounds like a good trend, especially for the cash-strapped.

While it's true that students *are* spending less, it's not because class materials are dropping in price or rental programs are increasing. Rather, there's a growing number of students who simply skip buying the required materials. In other words, students now increasingly equate "required" as meaning "optional."

In this article, we'll explore why this phenomenon is occurring, and what campus stores and professors can do to restore the perceived value of course materials.

Why do some students skip some purchases?

It would be easy to blame the rising costs of course materials. But in reality, two main drivers lead students to forgo their usual purchases: students don't take the "required" list as seriously as they once did, and online learning systems are growing in popularity.

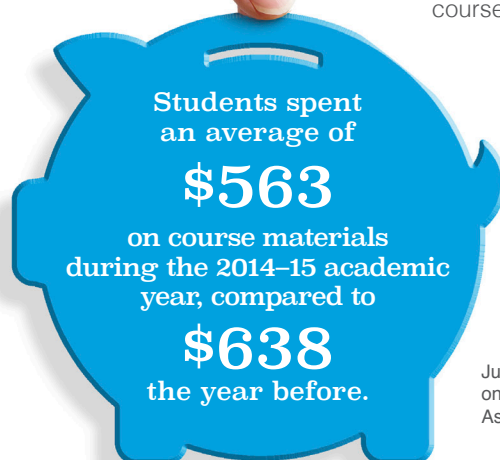
REASON 1:

**Purchasing required materials:
It's more of a guideline than a rule**

When the National Association of College Stores surveyed undergraduates on 23 campuses, its corresponding July 2015 report noted that of the students who did not purchase materials, "a greater percentage than in the past said it was because they believed them to be unnecessary."

The take-away: If students do not think that materials will positively affect their grade or help them gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter, they are not going to spend money on "unnecessary" books or other items.

Those are the attitudes of students who don't purchase required materials. But what about the students who *do*? Do they find the course materials valuable? Overwhelming, the answer is yes. A recent *Student Watch™ Report* said that the students who use the materials they rent or purchase "almost all the time" or "more than half the time" find them "extremely useful" (84 percent) and "very useful" (62 percent).



July 2015 survey of undergraduates on 23 campuses by the National Association of College Stores.

Why do some students skip some purchases? (cont.)

The powerful influence of instructors

In addition to students' views of whether or not required materials are actually necessary, two related trends affect students' purchasing decisions.

First, the number of instructors requiring textbooks is declining, and professors are simply "recommending" textbooks instead. Therefore, we can assume that students will buy the materials only if they think they're necessary to improve their performance.

Second, sometimes course material purchasing decisions are made by committee, which means that while all the professors in a department may agree to use the same book, some members are more committed to using the materials than others. However, through word of mouth, students may discover that a book isn't

really necessary and forgo purchasing it. Interestingly, the *Student Watch Report* found that if instructors incorporated the required course materials into their curriculum, student use of the material more than doubled.

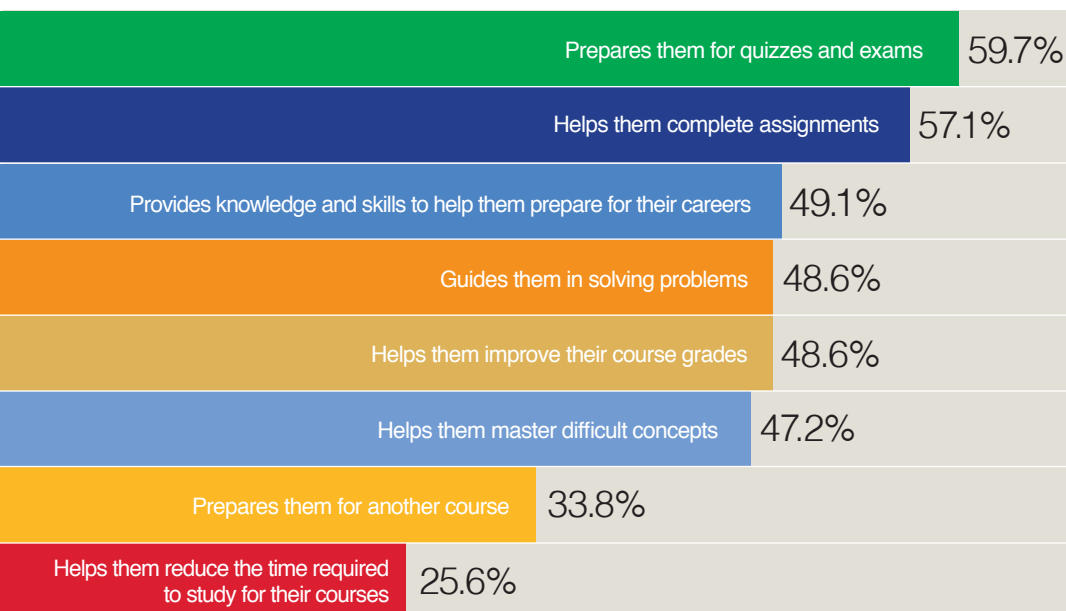
Reason 2: Online learning trends are growing in popularity

In the past, course materials merely referred to textbooks. Now publishers are pushing a new model called an integrated learning system, where students purchase online access to reading materials and multimedia as well as quiz and homework tools. Professors assign these learning systems in lieu of, or in addition to, textbooks. The trend is so hot that publishers are beginning to call themselves technology companies, not publishers, and the "college bookstore" moniker is giving way to "campus store," according to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Students welcome this trend. According to *Student Watch*, 69 percent of students agree that digital access codes help them better understand course topics. And more than half of all students believe that digital course materials improve learning at home, in the classroom and with online courses, again according to *Student Watch*.

The "online effect" goes beyond learning and studying to influencing purchasing decisions. Students also use online resources, such as **RateMyProfessors.com**, to research courses and instructors. Other students provide reviews on materials and whether they're really required or not, and use this information when making purchasing decisions.

What value do students expect to receive from their course materials?



From Book Industry Study Group, "Student Attitudes Toward Content in Higher Education"

Price vs. Necessity

A *Student Watch Report* published by OnCampus Research tells us that price was the top reason for not acquiring their course materials. But a category called "necessity," which includes open-ended comments such as, "I didn't think I'd need it" or "The professor or other students said it was unnecessary," actually tops cost, with 66 percent of students claiming these as reasons not to purchase.

Still, students are using their course materials more often than not, according to the report. Only about 23 percent of students admit to using the assigned materials less than half the time or very little.

But student feedback also tells us that those who use the textbooks at least half of the time find them useful, proving that course materials can be viewed as invaluable study aids that help students dissect subject matter and perform better on tests and projects.

How campus stores and professors can help improve the perceived value of textbooks

We know that students will purchase materials but only if they view them as necessary.* So what's the key in reestablishing their perceived value? Campus stores play a role by providing robust and easy-to-use adoption tools that help weed out weaker materials, but by far, professors have the greatest influence on students regarding the importance of course materials.

Here are three ways in which instructors can restore the perceived value of course materials:



ONE

Assign only course materials that they plan to use

Students talk with one another — either in person or online — and word quickly spreads as to how often the materials are actually used in class. As soon as students begin believing that “required materials” are really just optional, they won’t spend the money.

Faculty members can reverse this trend simply by assigning work that requires use of the materials, which helps students gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter and which ideally leads to better grades. When faculty members set this expectation, the materials immediately increase in value to students.



TWO

Embrace online sources

Eleven percent of students reported being assigned integrated learning systems during the past academic year, according to the Book Industry Study Group. If professors assign only digital reading materials — not full-blown online learning systems — students still find that valuable, considering that 83 percent of students agree that digital course materials provide them with multiple ways to learn (OnCampus Research).

For students to purchase digital materials or systems, they need to feel that they’re critical for success in their classes. To make online materials useful to students, professors should look for tools that allow students to easily access their materials and conveniently take notes, highlight and search materials, no matter what kind of device they use.

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THREE

Use online adoption tools offered by campus stores

Campus stores are increasingly making it easier for professors to immediately adopt materials used previously, including adoptions from peers, so the latest and greatest materials become part of the students’ learning experience. Robust tools also allow faculty members to quickly see other relevant materials for their courses and know right away if the materials will help students succeed. Such tools also make it easy for faculty members to read and respond to peer reviews of materials and weed out weaker materials over time.

Online adoption tools also greatly benefit students. They can view the list of their required materials as soon as they register, then decide if they want to buy or rent new, used or eBooks. They can also arrange for pick-up or delivery of materials. Additionally, there’s less confusion, and it’s easier for students to make their decisions quickly, rather than take a “wait-and-see” approach.

*Book Industry Study Group, “Student Attitudes Toward Content in Higher Education”



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Summary

Today's students are spending less on course materials because there is a growing number of students who simply skip buying the required materials. To them, "required" means "optional." The reasons why are varied — from students hearing that the materials weren't used much in class to online learning materials replacing required textbooks — but restoring the perceived value of course materials is possible. Professors play a key role. They can recommit to assigning and actively using required materials, embrace online learning tools and regularly employ them in their classrooms, and use adoption tools offered by campus stores. By taking these steps, students will again view required course materials as invaluable study aids that deepen understanding and lead to higher grades and overall success.