

# O'DONNELL & ASSOCIATES, LLC

## TO BUY OR NOT TO BUY

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### A Report On College Student Textbook Purchasing Behavior

#### **About O'Donnell & Associates**

OD&A, a comprehensive publishing services firm, delivers end-to-end publishing solutions for education and information companies. Whether conducting market research, developing a series of textbooks, creating online courses, or launching an eLearning initiative, OD&A offers the ingenuity and expertise to manage engagements from concept through design through product launch.

## Executive Summary

Since the early 1990s, the sell-through of college textbooks has steadily declined. Students still purchase college textbooks, but many believe that acquiring the “required” course materials is optional. O'Donnell & Associates decided to conduct a study to learn what makes students buy some books and not others, and to better understand the motivations and behavior behind the purchase of textbooks.

We conducted preliminary qualitative interviews with college students to determine general drivers and deterrents. OD&A then conducted a survey in fall 2009, garnering 848 undergraduate student responses from 236 college campuses.

The survey included questions about student behavior and scenario-based questions about what factors cause a student to choose whether to buy or not to buy the required course materials. Through preference analysis, students' major drivers and deterrents were unearthed. Our survey also uncovered what benefits students are willing to trade for others, and what disadvantages they are willing to accept for preferred benefits. Finally, the survey clearly revealed a series of student personae or segments, which are revealed below.

## The Typical Student

A general profile of student purchasing behavior emerges from the survey results. The typical student:

- **Pays for textbooks themselves:** (58%), although many **get help from parents/family** to purchase textbooks: (40%).
- **Conducts research:** Most students (69%) conduct research before making a textbook purchase, and their research habits vary. Most “always” window shop online, go to online sources other than stores (like “Rate My Professor”), and/or ask peers who have taken the course.
- **Shops online:** (56%), though many (47%) shop at the school bookstore.
- **Purchases used texts:** 54% would buy none of their books new and 34% would buy only some new.

The survey also revealed some generalities about the drivers and deterrents that influence textbook purchasing decisions, as follows:

- Universally, **students are more likely to purchase** the required textbook and course materials **if they perceive that the professor relies heavily on the textbook** for tests and homework.

- **Price is a deterrent and not a driver.** A student is less likely to purchase an expensive textbook, but not more likely to purchase a lower-priced textbook.
- **Other drivers** include: whether the course is required, interest in the course, and the instructor's reliance on the textbook.

Students feel that professors rarely communicate about why the textbook is valuable. Fewer than half feel that faculty explain why the textbook was chosen, show how to use it, allow students to purchase different versions of the book, or solicit student feedback. The majority feels the teacher communicates about how the textbook correlates to the course, but does not believe this influences their purchasing decisions.

## Student Personae

While the survey uncovered a generalized student purchasing profile, the most revealing findings lie in how student behavior can differ. OD&A analyzed and segmented the survey results to isolate five clear student personae. The following tables introduce each persona and provide a brief outline of how they differ.

<b>The Newbie</b>
Wet behind the ears: the freshmen of the OD&A survey head into the bookstore to buy books for required courses, and are less likely to research before purchasing.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 31% of sample</li> <li>• Primary driver: class is required</li> <li>• More likely to shop at bookstore than online</li> <li>• Fewer do research; more likely to consult friends and family during research</li> <li>• Value textbook more to organize topics and help retain information</li> <li>• Perceive that teacher explains more frequently how textbook correlates to course</li> </ul>

## The Pragmatist

The savvy senior: when it comes to buying textbooks, they know the most valuable factor is how much the instructor relies on the book for tests and homework. After deciding to purchase, this student researches and often buys online to find the least expensive alternative.

- 17% of sample
- Primary Driver: teacher's reliance on textbook for tests and homework
- Less important: price and whether class is required
- More research, more online shopping
- Buying behavior has evolved

## The Calculator

More than the sum of its parts: the calculator is looking for value. The instructor's reliance on the textbook is important, but not the be-all and end-all. They evaluate from all angles.

- 21% of sample
- Primary driver: teacher's reliance on textbook and digital materials
- Weigh many factors and consult friends and family more frequently
- Value textbook less to help study more effectively

## Aristotle

The interested learner: more common at 4-year private schools, this student is most likely to purchase a textbook if the course topic interests them, though value and grade factor in too.

- 16% of sample
- Primary driver: interest in class
- Upperclassmen at 4-yr private schools who borrow from library more frequently
- Value textbook more to help retain information and use as reference after course is over
- Perceive that teacher explains more frequently why textbook is chosen

## Penny Pincher

The ultimate cheapskate: price and value are the reigning decision makers for this student, who typically performs well in school, but doesn't rely on the textbook for high grades.

- 15% of sample
- Primary driver: price and value
- Teacher's reliance on textbook for tests and homework is less of a driver
- Tend to have a higher GPA, and overall value textbook less
- Pay for textbooks themselves more, and shop at online vendors more frequently

Detailed findings of the general student sample and the different personae as well as other segmentation (type of school and major) can be found in the complete report.

### How Attitudes Have Changed In The Past 15 Years

The survey revisited a few questions that were asked in a study on student versus faculty attitudes towards textbooks that OD&A conducted for the Association of American Publishers in 1994-95. The following table shows the decline in the textbook's importance over time: students today value the textbook less than they did 15 years ago.

Textbook Benefits	Very Important 1994	Very Important 2009
It helps me retain information	64%	48%
It clarifies concepts	63%	62%
It compensates where the lectures are lacking	62%	55%
It helps me study more effectively	55%	53%
It organizes topics	51%	41%
It helps me learn more effectively	46%	43%
I can use it as a reference after the course is over	45%	32%

## **Conclusions**

### **Shifting Attitudes Towards Textbooks**

The role of the textbook has changed in the past 15 years. Today's students are much less likely to consider the textbook as the foundation of the course. The professor is the foundation and critical content resource in today's courses. The textbook is seen more as a tool for success, used for homework and testing, and its chief benefits are in helping students pass or prepare for assessment.

### **Professors Not Communicating Value**

Professors are not communicating the value of the textbook, which is part of the reason that fewer students purchase textbooks today than fifteen years ago. If you add this to the myriad other ways that today's students research and make the purchase decision, then you see that the faculty adoption is less of an influencer than it was in the past.

### **Price is a Deterrent Not Driver**

Students are less likely to purchase the textbook if it is too expensive – indicating that price is a deterrent. This study further shows that price doesn't drive the decision to purchase a textbook (with the exception of the penny pinchers). The role of price as deterrent not driver helps to shed light on the slow adoption rate of ebooks, which are universally cheaper but not seen by students as adding value.

### **Students Are Not One-Size-Fits-All**

This summary provides an overview of the different student personae and hopefully a baseline for rethinking the way companies market educational materials to students. Marketing to specific student personae gives industry players an opportunity to change their messaging so that it resonates with the different market segments, and takes into account their distinctive needs, perceptions and motivations. .

### **Students = Sophisticated Consumers**

The "to buy or not to buy" decision is complex, and students weigh a number of factors, balancing drivers and deterrents, into the decision. They research before purchasing and select the most advantageous purchase option. While faculty behavior and reliance on the textbook strongly influences their decision, this study clearly shows that the industry needs to treat the student, not just the professor, as the textbook consumer.

## Quotes and Comments by Student Research Participants

### On Research Before Buying

“A book that has a new edition every year for five years in a row, for example, signals to me that the editions must not be very different from each other in content and I would not buy the newest/most expensive edition.” - Pragmatist

“Many professors say the textbooks are required, but make no reference to how often it will be used. So I go on Ratemyprofessor.com, where some students who have taken the class before let you know if you need to buy the books or not. That really helps my decision.” - Typical College Student

### On New Versus Used Textbooks

“If it can be used for more than one class like math, I would tend to buy it new. Also if it was a subject that I was really interested in, I would also be more likely to buy it new.” - Newbie

“If I can find it cheaper or it doesn't matter which edition I get, I'll buy it online for as little as possible.” - Pragmatist

### On Textbook Benefits

“Interest in the subject [influences my decision], and I have bought recommended books that I thought I could use later in life as well as class.” - Aristotle

“When I started college all the books seemed important, but now it seems that some books are repetitious and I know better where my strengths are in certain types of classes.” - Calculator

### On Teacher Communication

“I wait [to purchase textbooks] until after going to the first class and listening to what the professor has to say about the textbook. If it sounds as though we will use it on a regular basis I am more likely to buy it.” - Typical College Student

“When I started I would just go to the campus bookstore and buy everything. I would try to get the book used if the campus store had it. Now I shop around for the best deal I can get on books. I look at different vendors, compare prices for previous editions if the teacher has said they're acceptable.” - Former Newbie

## Research Methodology

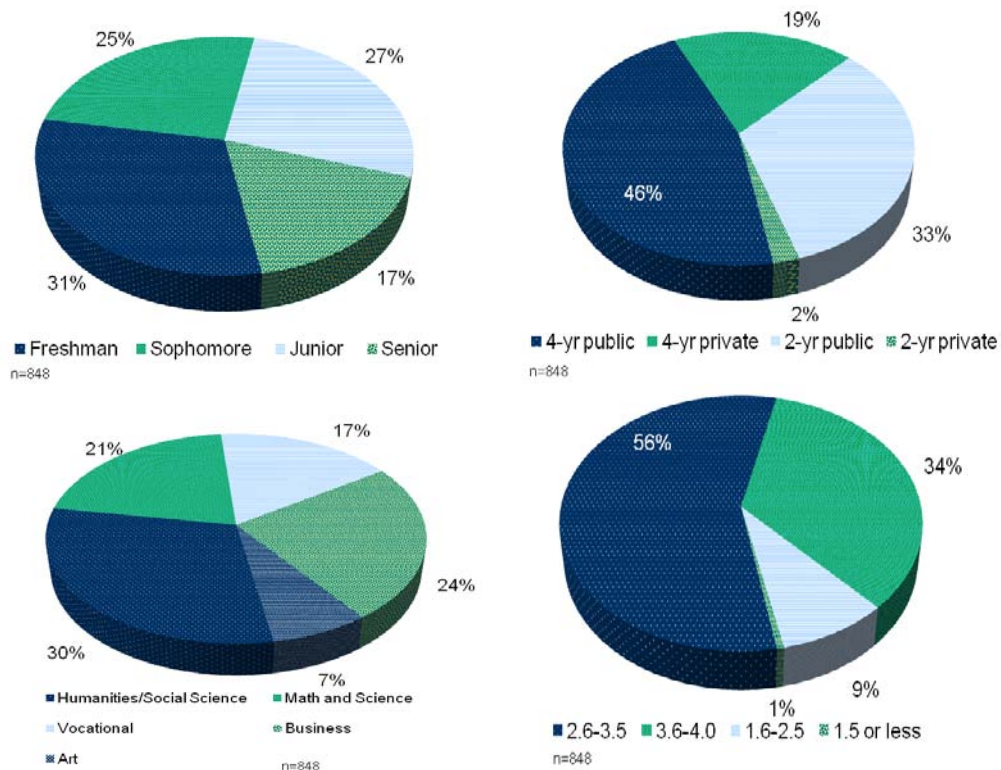
The research outlined in this report was conducted by O'Donnell & Associates, LLC, in two phases. The first phase consisted of qualitative research in the form of initial phone interviews with college students in the summer to determine the following questions:

- Why do students purchase textbooks?
- Why do they not purchase textbooks?
- When do they purchase textbooks?
- What do they use in place of the textbook if they decide not to purchase?
- What attributes do they value about the textbook?

The second phase of the research consisted of an online survey. A total of 848 students completed the survey. Students were only disqualified if they were not currently an undergraduate student at an institution of higher education. More information on how we filtered the survey results to isolate our personae can be found in the complete report.

We'd like to give a special thanks to Cypress Research for weighting our sample and to the Association of American Publishers permitting us to include the results for the study conducted in 1994-5.

The graphs below illustrate the demographics of our sample after the data was weighted.



Note. This summary contains information extracted from a forthcoming research report. For more information, please contact: Alison Harford at O'Donnell & Associates, LLC, e-mail: [aharford@odassoc.com](mailto:aharford@odassoc.com) or phone: (203) 973-0635.