Restoring Students’ Perceived Value of Course Materials

According to the National Association of College Stores, average student spending on required course materials has decreased by more than 30 percent in the last decade. 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

According to a 2018 Student Monitor survey, 43 percent of interviewed students cited course materials as being “too expensive” as the most commonly reported reason for not acquiring all required course materials.

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 “overly expensive” books or other items. However, a recent Student Watch™ report indicated that when comparing a student’s self-reported GPA, students who obtained all their materials by the first day of classes were slightly more likely to have a higher GPA than those who did not. Specifically, 40 percent of students who had all their materials the first day reported a GPA of 3.6 to 4.0 compared to 36 percent who had some and 29 percent who didn’t have any of their materials the first day.

1Source: https://www.insiderhighered.com/news/2018/08/16/students-are-spending-less-ever-course-materials
2Source: http://www.nacs.org/research/studentwatchfindings.aspx
3Student Monitor, Lifestyle & Media — Learning Materials, Spring 2018
4Student Watch™: Attitudes and Behaviors toward Course Materials, 2016–2017 Report
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.

For those opting not to have course materials by the first day of classes, the Student Watch™ report found that 15 percent of students couldn’t complete assigned readings, 10 percent found it difficult or were unable to participate in class and 9 percent couldn’t complete homework.5

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.

Students welcome this trend. According to the Student Watch report, 44 percent of students agree that digital access codes help them better understand course topics.5 Similarly, 26 percent believe that access codes help them apply content better, 22 percent retain better, and 16 percent learn better and faster, again according to the Student Watch report.5

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.

Student behavior regarding course material purchases

Price vs. Necessity

A Student Watch report published by OnCampus Research tells us that 25 percent of students cited price as the reason for not acquiring their course materials. But a category called “Wanted to see if I really needed materials” actually tops cost, with 57 percent percent of students claiming these as reasons not to purchase.5

Still, students are using their course materials more often than not, according to the report. Overall, 19 percent of students indicated that their required course materials were “only slightly” to “not at all” useful.5

But student feedback also tells us that more than half use their course materials for all courses when preparing for exams,7 proving that course materials can be viewed as invaluable study aids that help students dissect subject matter and perform better on tests and projects.

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5 Student Watch™: Attitudes and Behaviors toward Course Materials, 2016–2017 Report
6 Student Monitor, Lifestyle & Media — Learning Materials, Spring 2018
7 Student Watch: Attitudes and Behaviors toward Course Materials, 2016–2017 Report
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.

Eighty-nine percent of students report using a Learning Management System (LMS) during the past academic year, according to a Spring 2018 Student Monitor survey. If professors assign only digital reading materials — not full-blown online learning systems — students still find that valuable, considering that 13 percent purchased an average of 1.3 online homework solutions (OHS) for the Fall 2017 term spending an average of $89, according to Student Monitor.

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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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.
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.

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.
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