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Textbooks stretch checkbooks

College students seek ways to save.

Marsha Sills
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August 25, 2004

LAFAYETTE — To rent or buy? Used or new? Those are the questions college students face at the start of each semester as they stretch wallets to outfit their minds for classes.



P.C. Piazza/The Lafayette Daily Advertiser
Judy Hebert explains the details of textbook rental to UL Lafayette student Jonathan McDonald on Tuesday at TRI Textbook Rentals in Lafayette.

Accounting sophomore Jonathan McDonald decided to rent his books for the first time this semester.

"I'm trying to save money this semester," McDonald said before walking out of Textbook Rentals with an armload. "I spent about \$224, and normally, I spend about \$400."

He sometimes sells back his books, but said that sometimes it's not worth the hassle.

"In the past, sometimes they wouldn't buy the books back," he said. "I figured I'd get it done easy this time."

The cost of college textbooks prompted one family to offer students an alternative.

About 18 years ago, Becky Nall's father balked at the price of her brother's textbooks and decided to start what has become a family business — Textbook Rentals Inc. Nall owns the Lafayette location and five others across the state. Other family members own about a half dozen other locations across the state.

"My brother had started college and spent about \$400 or \$500 on books and when he went to sell them back, they didn't want to give him anything back for them," Nall said.

Instead of shopping around this semester, pre-pharmacy major John Hendrix headed straight to the UL Lafayette bookstore.

"I just come here," he said, clutching about \$200 worth of books stacked in his arms. As far as checking for bargains online, he added, "I don't like waiting for my books."



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Textbooks stretch checkbooks

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But some online companies guarantee two-day delivery and customers can shell out more cash for overnight shipping.

Online booksellers are able to offer cheaper prices because there's usually no overhead, said Marci Crossan, spokeswoman for Canadian-based abebooks.com. The company has more than 12,000 booksellers and more than 55 million titles.

The buyer's ability to compare prices on screen also helps spur competition between sellers online, Crossan said.

"The Internet allows people to see what other people are offering. The prices are forced down," Crossan said.

"We're selling about 25,000 books each day," Crossan said. "It's one of the busiest times for book buying. Those are the students. We see huge spikes in August, September and then another huge spike in January."

On Tuesday, 14 cash registers were open to assist customers inside the UL Lafayette bookstore.

"Today has been a killer," said Robert Richard, bookstore manager. He expects another crowd today. "I know there's people who saw the lines today and didn't want to wait in those lines."

Follett's, a bookstore on St. Mary Boulevard, offers students another option to the university bookstore. After their first day of class, Josh Camp and Kelly Rothermel scanned titles, searching for their books.

"Do you have this one?" Rothermel asked Camp before stacking a literature book on top of her biology workbooks.

Camp, who was undeclared for the past two years, has kept each book he's bought as he searched for a major — "geology, sociology, general studies. I don't sell back my books," Camp said. "It's not worth it, and I don't need the money."

Two years and about \$400 a semester later on books, he's in his second year of earning a nursing degree.

"I've taken every type of class," Camp said.

Last semester, he said, he spent about \$550 on his books.

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