



# New Realities for College Bookstores

An industry outlook and  
what it means for  
student outcomes



**BibliU**

November 2023

# Abstract

The traditional brick-and-mortar campus store no longer serves students' needs. Institutions that are digitizing course materials delivery are better equipped to promote improved student outcomes.

This paper analyzes the state of campus bookstores and argues why digitization of course materials, such as those found in Equitable Access (EA) and Inclusive Access (IA), is an imperative course of action among higher ed institutions. Digital delivery of course materials:

1. Lowers the cost of attendance by reducing the price of textbooks
- 2 Guarantees access on the first day of class
- 3.Provides an enriched and more accessible learning experience for the modern learner.

The race to digitization is on for the college bookstore industry, and the runway is short. Higher ed institutions across the US are at a critical juncture; those that have digitized their course materials delivery have an edge over those who haven't. Not only are they in a better position to create a financially sustainable revenue stream by reinventing their campus stores, but they are also better able to support improved student outcomes.

### Textbook revenues continue to decline

In 2022, higher-ed textbook sales in the US generated over \$3.18 billion in revenue from about 29 million copies of college textbooks (Figure 1)--a decline of 35% compared to 2013 (\$4.88 billion). With a decline of 1.24% over 2021, college textbook sales in 2022 were the lowest in a decade, excluding the pandemic-affected 2020. The National Association of College Stores (NACS) reported that in 2022, 72% of students shopped for course materials from their campus bookstore or its website. This means that campus bookstores generated about \$2.3 billion in course materials revenue in 2022.



Figure 1. US College Textbook Revenue in Billions

## The College Bookstore Landscape at a Glance

### Bookstore Operators

NACS estimates there are currently about 4,000 campus stores in the US. In 2023, BibliU surveyed 2,400 US college bookstores as part of an independent data mining project. Of those, about one-third were independent stores (operated by the institution). Most of the remaining two-thirds were leased stores (operated by a bookstore chain), with an overwhelming majority run by the two largest chains in the US – Barnes & Noble and Follett.

## Bookstore Categories n=2,299

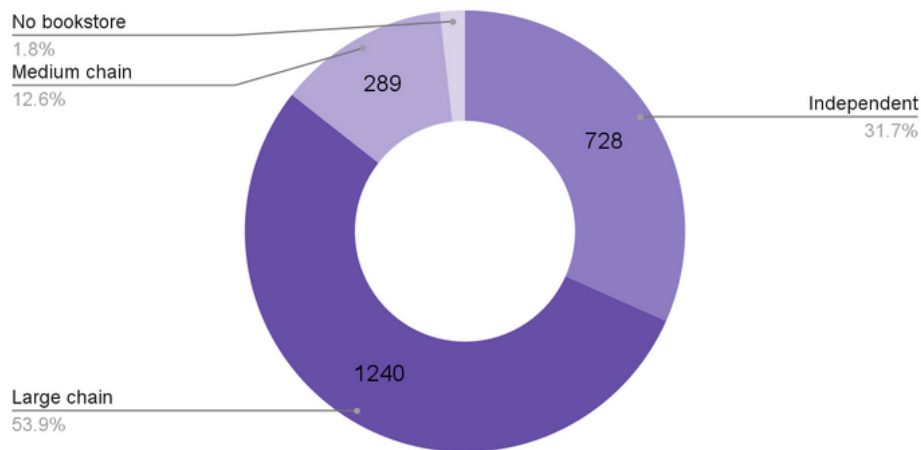


Figure 2. Share of US College Bookstore Operators

## How are campus bookstores distributed throughout the US?

State	Count of College Bookstores by State (Top 10)
California	170
New York	155
Texas	116
Pennsylvania	114
Ohio	101
North Carolina	99
Illinois	98
Florida	79
Massachusetts	75
Georgia	65

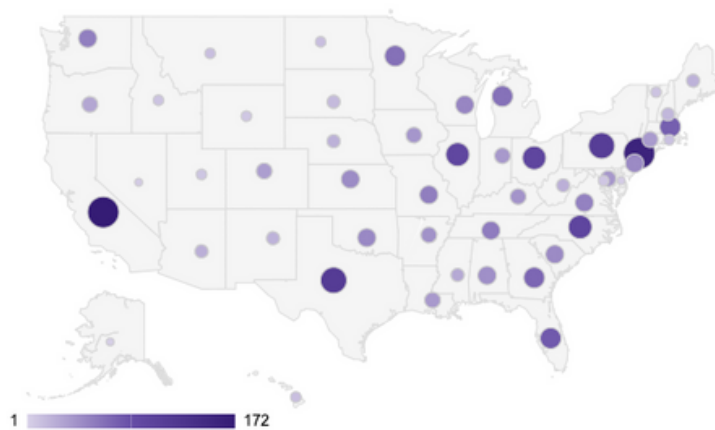


Figure 3. Geographical spread of US college bookstores

Concentration of large chains in the US

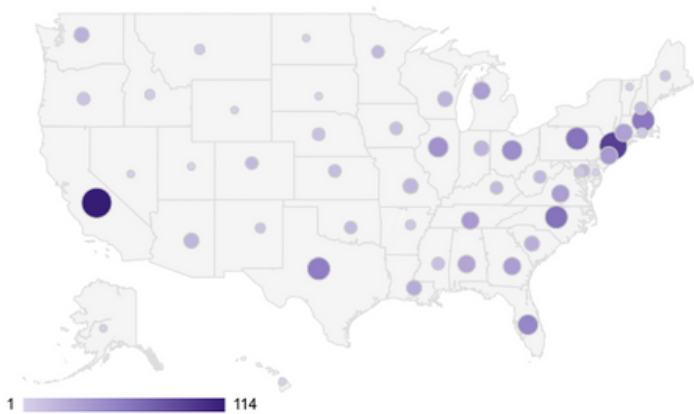


Figure 4. Geographical spread of US college bookstores operated by a large chain

State	Count of Large Chain Stores by State (Top 10)
California	114
New York	92
North Carolina	63
Pennsylvania	62
Massachusetts	59
Texas	56
Florida	50
Ohio	46
Illinois	43
New Jersey	38

Concentration of medium chains in the US

State	Count of Medium Chain Stores by State (Top 10)
New York	30
Ohio	17
California	16
Pennsylvania	16
Illinois	13
Texas	13
Wisconsin	13
Kansas	10
Virginia	10
Iowa	9

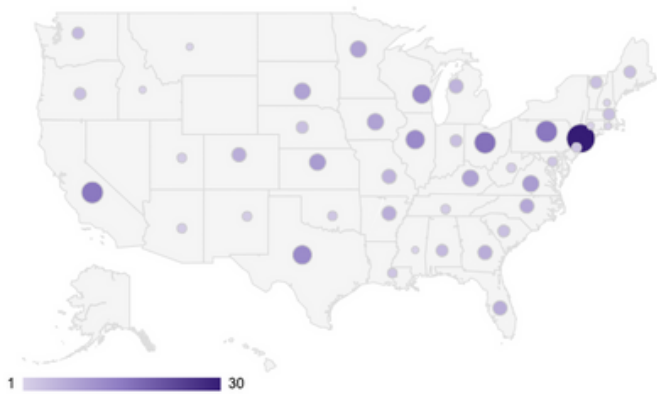


Figure 5. Geographical spread of US college bookstores operated by a medium chain

## Concentration of independent college bookstores in the US

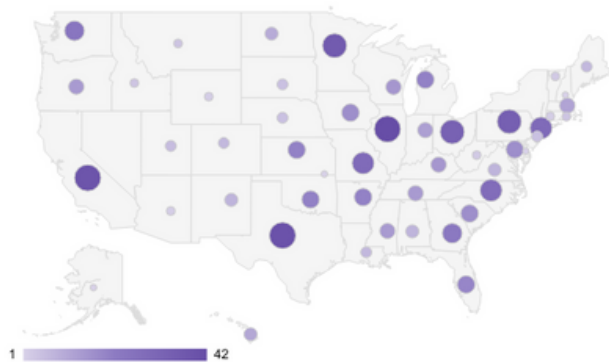


Figure 6. Geographical spread of independent US college bookstores

State	Count of Independent Stores by State (Top 10)
Illinois	42
Texas	40
California	39
Minnesota	36
Pennsylvania	34
Ohio	33
Missouri	29
New York	29
North Carolina	28
Washington	24

## By how much do large chains outnumber independent stores by state?

State	Large chain stores	Independent chains	Ratio of large chain stores to independent stores by state (Top 10)
Connecticut	33	2	16.5
New Hampshire	14	1	14.0
Arizona	19	2	9.5
District of Columbia	8	0	8.0
New Jersey	38	5	7.6
West Virginia	18	3	6.0
Massachusetts	59	12	4.9
Virginia	35	8	4.4
Alabama	30	8	3.8
Louisiana	26	7	3.7

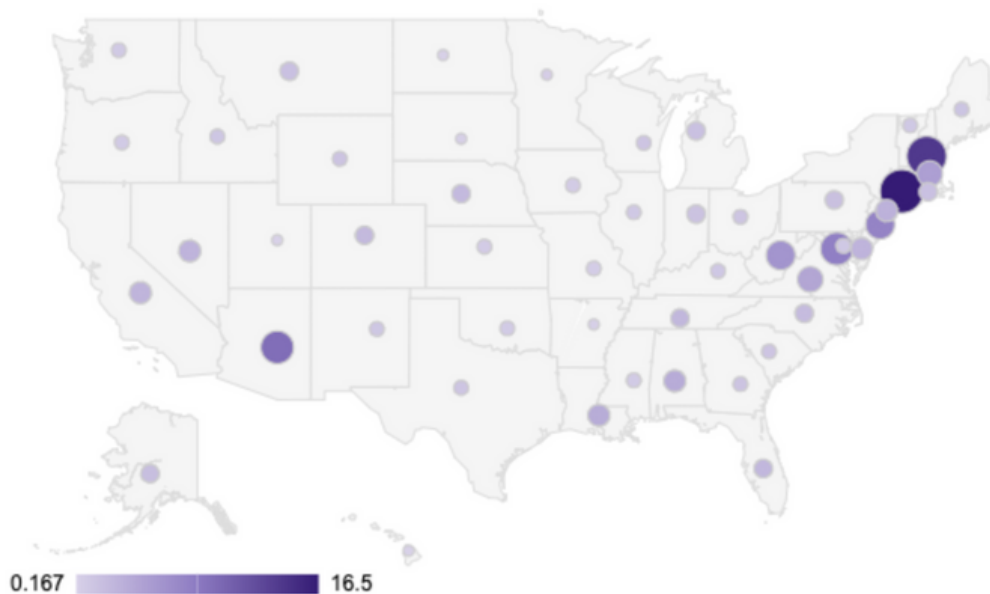


Figure 7. Ratio of large chain to independent campus store by state

## Bookstore Operators By Institution Type

BibliU's data-mining project collected data about the institution type of the institutions with known bookstore operators ( $n=2,295$ ), categorized as follows: Public 4-year (587), Public 2-year (804), and Private not-for-profit (904)

Cross-referencing the data about bookstore operators and institution types showed a larger share of chain-operated stores than independent stores in private, not-for-profit institutions. Forty percent of bookstores operated by large chains were located in private, not-for-profit institutions. More than half (54%) of the stores operated by medium chains were in private, not-for-profit institutions. (Figure 8). Nearly three-quarters (72%) of bookstores in private, not-for-profit institutions in the dataset were operated by a large or medium bookstore chain. In comparison, only about a quarter (26%) were independently operated by the institution.

There may be several factors at play here. For instance, average enrollments in private institutions (1,500) are smaller compared to those in public institutions (6,300). It may be more fiscally sound for an institution to lease its space to a chain operator than to take it in-house. Furthermore, private institutions are less likely to issue a Request For Proposal (RFP) for bookstore operators. Thus, a chain operator can presumably offer their services arbitrarily. If both are true, there is a strong case for private, not-for-profit institutions to look into digitizing their course materials delivery. Doing so will enable them to serve their student population while eliminating the cost of operating a physical store and potentially recouping auxiliary revenue.

	Public 2-year	Public 4-year	Private Not-for-profit
Large and medium chain	479	397	653

Public 2 year, Public 4 year and Private NFP

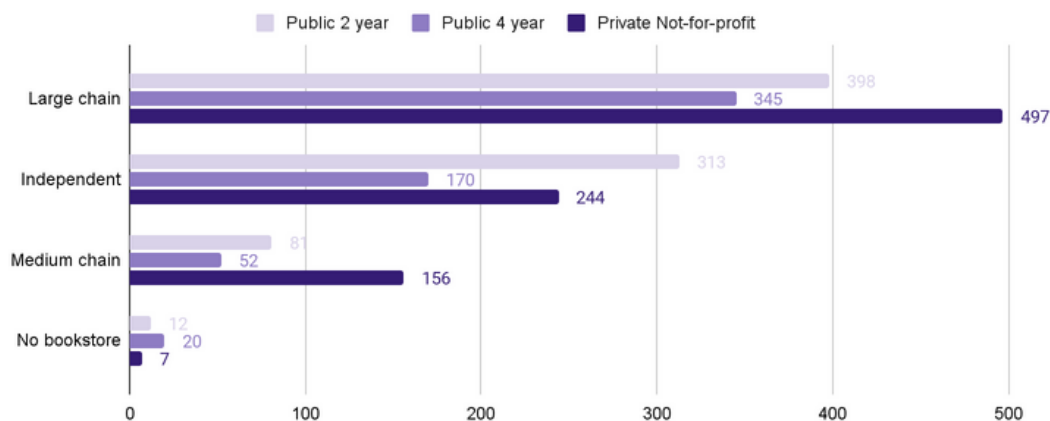


Figure 8. Count of bookstore operators by institution type

Another interesting finding from BibliU's data-mining project was that among independent stores, 43% were categorized as public 2-year institutions. While large chains still outnumber independent stores among public 2-year institutions, they do so by a lower margin (Figure 9). This might suggest that among public 2-year institutions, running their stores independently instead of leasing to a chain operator remains a financially viable option.

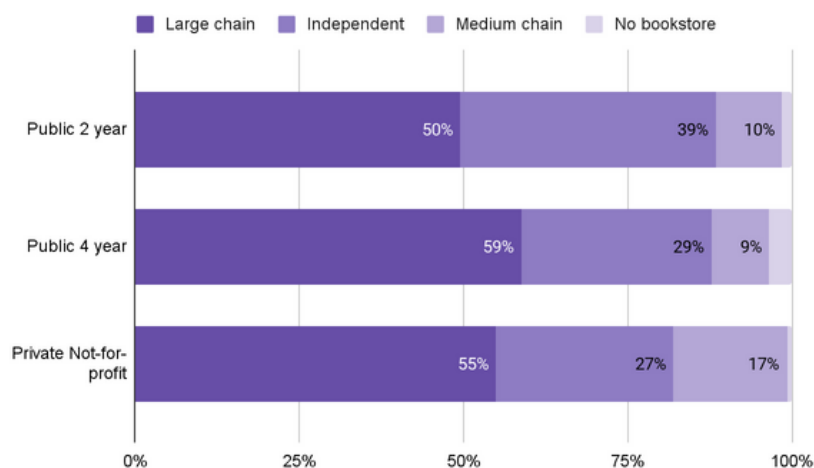


Figure 9. Percent of bookstore operators by institution type



## Bookstore Type

The same data-mining project done by BibliU revealed the bookstore type of 563 schools out of the 2,400 investigated. Eighty percent (449) of those bookstores had a hybrid of physical retail space and online presence. Meanwhile, 20% (114) were found to be completely virtual through eCommerce, Inclusive Access (IA), or Equitable Access (EA).

This is a telltale sign of the shifting landscape in college campus stores. Ten years ago, a campus served by a completely virtual store was unheard of. In today's outlook, campus stores are not only equipping themselves with hybrid offerings, but some are abolishing their physical retail spaces and shifting to digital delivery.

Store Type

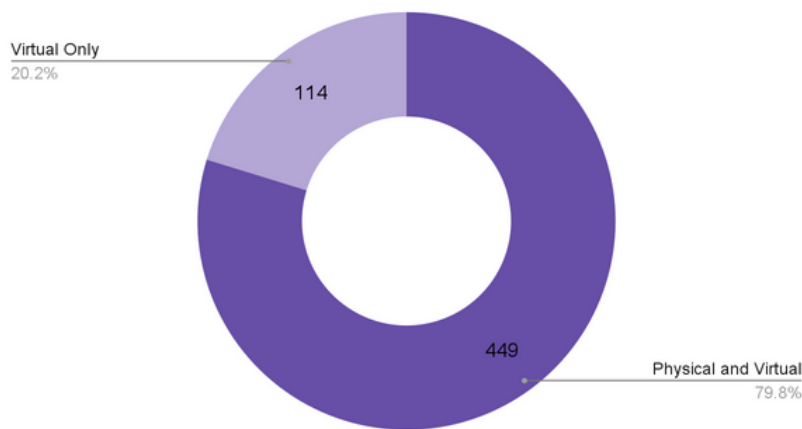


Figure 10. Percent of bookstore type, n=563

## Hybrid Physical and Virtual Stores By State

State	Count of Physical and Virtual Stores By State (Top 10)
New York	40
Pennsylvania	29
California	25
Ohio	25
Florida	20
Texas	20
Alabama	19
North Carolina	18
Michigan	17
Illinois	15

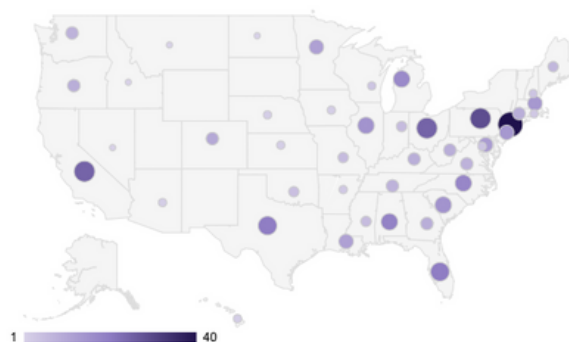


Figure 11. Geographical spread of hybrid physical and virtual stores

## Virtual Stores By State

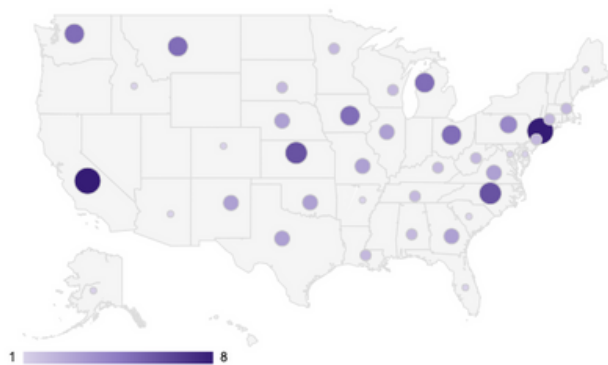


Figure 12. Geographical spread of virtual stores

State	Count of Virtual Only Stores By State (Top 10)
California	8
New York	8
Kansas	6
North Carolina	6
Iowa	5
Michigan	5
Montana	5
Ohio	5
Washington	5
Pennsylvania	4

## Impact of student behavior on the fate of campus stores

The fate of campus bookstores and student behavior around course materials are expectedly intertwined. Nearly three-quarters of students purchased course materials at their campus bookstore or website. As student sentiments around purchasing course materials erode, so do campus bookstore revenues. According to a recent NACS Student Watch Report, student spending on course materials for 2021-22 was the lowest in 24 years.

Cost is the number one driver of why students either delay or skip purchasing their course materials. Textbook prices are rising about three times the rate of inflation. The cost of textbooks increases by an average of 6% each year, doubling every 11 years. On average, students spend \$600-\$1,200 per year on course materials.

As a result, almost seven out of 10 college students don't buy their textbooks due to cost. Some are working extra hours and even skipping meals to afford course materials. These are clear indicators that the cost of textbooks is a heavy burden to college-goers' financial plight.

## Why Digitization Is The Path Forward

Over the past few years, institutions across the US have digitized their course materials. Some market figures indicate a trend toward increased digitization:

- In 2022, 39% of students acquired materials through IA or EA models, up from 15% in 2019
- 11% of US higher-ed institutions have implemented either an IA or EA program
- Among institutions that serve minority populations—statistically in the lower rung of the socioeconomic spectrum—13% have implemented IA

First, the lower price tag of eBooks is more appealing to students. While textbook prices continue to rise, the average eBook remains 32% lower than its hard copy counterpart.

Second, programs like IA and EA guarantee access on the first day of class. South Piedmont Community College in Monroe, NC, implemented BibliU's Universal Learning, an EA model. Through Universal Learning, more than nine out of 10 students at SPCC can now access their course materials within days of the semester starting.

Third, a digital format provides an enriched and more accessible learning experience for the modern learner, contributing to better student outcomes. In an August 2023 survey conducted by Propeller Insights among 18-24-year-olds, 44% of the respondents believe that physical textbooks will be completely phased out and replaced by digital textbooks. At Jackson College in Jackson, MI, the usage of BibliU's Universal Learning is positively linked with higher grades and increased retention.

## Conclusion

The continually declining college textbook revenue is a clear sign of deep problems in the college bookstore industry. Institutions that have evolved their campus bookstores from the traditional brick-and-mortar model to digital delivery models that provide instant access, such as IA or EA, are better positioned to support student success.

## About BibliU

EdTech innovator BibliU is defining the future of higher education by democratizing content accessibility. Designed to address the unique requirements of students, faculty, libraries and publishers, BibliU is a learning enablement platform that empowers higher education institutions to streamline their textbook and courseware workflows to achieve greater student outcomes, affordability and social mobility. With BibliU, colleges and universities can finally deliver on the promise of digitalization, guaranteeing all students have first-day access to the learning content they need. More information is available at [www.bibliu.com](http://www.bibliu.com).

## References

1. <https://wordsrated.com/college-textbook-sales-statistics/>
2. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/laurendebter/2023/10/20/how-struggling-college-bookstores-found-a-way-to-beat-amazon/?sh=701639e25efc>
3. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/laurendebter/2023/10/20/how-struggling-college-bookstores-found-a-way-to-beat-amazon/?sh=701639e25efc>
4. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=1122#:~:text=Among%20postsecondary%20Title%20IV%20institutions,2%2C270%20private%20for%2Dprofit%20institutions.>
5. <https://www.nacs.org/nacs-student-watch-report-course-materials-spending-dropped>
6. <https://educationdata.org/average-cost-of-college-textbooks>
7. <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3027385.3027437>
8. <https://publishers.org/inclusive-access-supports-student-success/#:~:text=According%20to%20new%202022%20research,the%20beginning%20of%20the%20semester>
9. <https://bibliu.com/case-studies/south-piedmont-community-college>
10. [https://surveys.propellerinsights.com/r/445431\\_64d569b4935951.85332332](https://surveys.propellerinsights.com/r/445431_64d569b4935951.85332332)
11. <https://bibliu.com/go/student-success-and-retention>