SMU grad creates program to find cheap textbooks

Fort Worth Star-Telegram (TX) - July 18, 2013

- Author/Byline: Diane Smith, dianesmith@star-telegram.com
- Readability: 8-9 grade level (Lexile: 1090)

Christian Genco paid about $1,200 for college textbooks one semester and decided he'd had enough.

"It was ridiculous," said Genco, 21.

The next semester, Genco decided to shop online and after a couple of days of searching, he found books for between $800 and $900.

Genco liked the fact that the books were cheaper online, but was dismayed that it took two days to find the best deals.

Genco, then a student at SMU, went to work. Using computer coding and information already available on the Internet, he created a program that automatically searched for the lowest priced textbooks he needed.

"I did that for myself," he said.

Genco said he introduced the program to his friends at SMU, who loved it. After graduating in May, he continued to fine tune the program, which has evolved into a free service for college students called textbooksplease.com .

Genco's website offers college students a chance to compare prices for textbooks with a series of computer clicks. It also exemplifies a theme Genco has been promoting — that with knowledge of computer coding, people can solve a multitude of everyday issues.

"It's tremendous the power you can get from computers," Genco said.

The program relies on information that is already available online so he didn't need to get permission from universities to do the searches, Genco said. It simply automates that search for books and provides students a list to work from, he said.

The program pulls books from a variety of retailers or shopping sites such as amazon.com.

Genco said he said he gets an "affiliate's fee" from the retailers to help maintain the website.

The latest version of Genco's program went live about three weeks ago — just in time for the upcoming college textbook shopping season.

Between 100 to 200 students already used earlier versions of the program, Genco said.

Esther Liu, graduate student at SMU studying operations research, said she has used Genco's program for about three years — as it evolved with improvements.

"It's changed quite a bit," Liu said."It's saved me hundreds of dollars each semester."

Liu, 21, estimates she has saved about $300 to $400 every time she used the program.

Liu said the engineering textbooks she's had to purchase are expensive, ranging from $100 to $300 each. But she's been able to find cheaper prices on textbookplease.com.

Lui said the program shows how college students today find their own solutions to problems .

"The Internet has opened the possibilities of solving problems on our own," she said, adding that Genco saw the answer to a pocketbook issue many college students complain about.

The cost of books and supplies for the average student at a four-year public college is estimated to be $1,200 per year, according to the College Board .

Textbook costs has been an ongoing issue in higher education. In 2008, lawmakers passed the federal Higher Education Opportunity Act, which aimed to lessen student costs, offer more transparency and protect college students as consumers of textbooks.

At SMU, Genco majored in computer programming with a pre-medical specialization. He is currently working with his father to create an medical app that helps doctors document patient visits with an electronic health record.

Genco is no stranger to being in the news. In June 2009, he was featured in reports about Southlake Carroll High School's medical

academy.

Natalie Genco, Christian's mother, said she thought the idea for a textbook shopping program was "brilliant." Later, when her son finished, she was impressed.

"We were like, 'Wow. Awesome.'" she said.

This report includes material from the Star-Telegram archives.