

Taming the Cost of Textbooks

Do you know how much the textbook you have selected for your courses will cost students? Is the textbook bundled and sold with a CD or supplementary materials really necessary for the course? How often are new editions of a textbook released by the publisher? Are there significant differences between editions? Answers to these questions and their impact on the cost of textbooks are eye-opening!

For an undergraduate student taking a full load of courses the cost of textbooks alone can easily add up to several hundred dollars a semester and several thousand dollars over a four-year period.

In less than 20 years, textbook prices have nearly tripled, “rising at the average rate of six percent per year” (Powers, 2006). The California Public Interest Research Group found that 22 frequently assigned textbooks had an average cost of \$131.44 (Capriccioso, 2006). For an undergraduate student taking a full load of courses the cost of textbooks alone can easily add up to several hundred dollars a semester and several thousand dollars over a four-year period. Considering these numbers, it is understandable why there is uproar over the escalating cost of textbooks. To address this issue, state policy makers and universities are exploring ways to ensure students have access to affordable textbooks.

In 2004, the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) requested university faculty, student groups and bookstore managers to examine college textbook prices and the feasibility of a textbook rental program. The ensuing report states that “although textbook rental programs would provide a lower-cost alternative to students, such programs are inappropriate for the large, research-oriented public universities in Illinois” (State of Illinois Board of Higher Education, 2005). There are, however, ways to make textbooks affordable. Consider the following cost-saving alternatives from the IBHE report, the Chicago Tribune (Bigda, 2007), and other common sense suggestions:

1. Investigate the cost of a textbook before adopting it for a course. If the cost is prohibitive, explore other alternatives such as an electronic version of the book which may be less expensive.
2. Make textbook adoptions early so that students can explore cheaper alternatives for purchasing the book.
3. Increase students’ awareness of textbook purchase or acquisition options, such as used textbooks, electronic texts, discount book sellers, cheaper versions of the same books sold abroad, and reserve copies in the library. Facilitate book exchanges and swaps among students. This could be a service activity for student organizations. See bookswap.com, a student-to-student bulletin board, where students can sell and buy textbooks 24x7.
4. Check textbooks on the same course topics available for other disciplines. Sometimes books on the same topic may be sold at different prices for different disciplines.
5. Avoid requiring more than one textbook for a course. Instead, provide class notes or other materials for content covered in additional textbooks.

Support publishers who provide low-cost textbooks.

6. Analyze the content and price of different textbooks available for the same course. Consider using a less expensive textbook that contains most of the necessary content and provide class materials for the missing information.
7. Use the same textbook for several semesters even if the publisher releases newer editions. Newer editions may only have minor changes or corrections and faculty can notify students about the revisions.
8. Use textbooks with substantial content that can be used for more than one course. In some cases, it may be possible to use one part of a book for an introductory course and the other part for an advanced course.
9. Discourage publishers from bundling textbooks with CDs or supplementary materials that are not essential for the course.
10. Negotiate with publishers for lower prices based on volume purchase or textbook adoptions for several courses. Support publishers who provide low-cost textbooks. Check with bookstores that might have suggestions about negotiating lower textbook prices.
11. Develop your own course materials and post them online or have them sold as a bookstore course pack.

Summary

There may not be one perfect solution for taming the cost of textbooks for all courses. But we can join the ranks of other universities and faculty who are implementing a number of alternatives mentioned above. The results can benefit us all.

References

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