Textbook Affordability

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? Are those materials necessary for the course? How often are new editions of a textbook released by the publisher? Are there significant differences between editions? These questions cut to the heart of the textbook affordability issue.

Textbook prices have risen by 812% over the past 35+ years, and since 2006, textbook costs have increased at a rate four times faster than the rate of inflation (Zook, 2017). The California Public Interest Research Group found that 22 frequently assigned textbooks had an average cost of $131.44 (Capriccioso, 2006). The average cost of textbooks per student per year has risen to over $1100, and 30% of college students use financial aid to buy their textbooks (Zook, 2017), contributing to the student loan debt burden students face. Considering these numbers, the outcry over the escalating cost of textbooks is understandable. To address this issue, state policy makers and universities are exploring ways to ensure students can access affordable textbooks.

In 2006, 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 and other cost-saving measures for textbooks. The ensuing report states that “Textbook rental programs and alternative cost-saving measures can help reduce the financial burden on students and families from escalating textbook costs. For such efforts to be successful, however, they will need the support of institutional administrators, students, faculty, bookstore operators, and publishers. State assistance in procuring funds for start-up costs would be vital to the success of textbook rental programs” (Illinois Board of Higher Education, 2007). Aside from textbook rental programs, there are ways for individual faculty to make textbooks affordable for their students. Consider the following cost-saving alternatives from the IBHE report and the Chicago Tribune (Bigda, 2007), as well as other common-sense recommendations:

1. Discourage faculty and academic departments from pecuniary benefits from textbook selection.

2. 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 or a previous (but still relevant) edition, which may be less expensive.
3. Make textbook adoptions early so that students can explore lower-cost alternatives for purchasing the book (e.g. comparison shopping, interlibrary loan, book swap, online marketplace orders, etc.).

4. 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 24/7.

5. 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.

6. Avoid requiring more than one textbook for a course. Instead, provide class notes or supplemental materials for content covered in additional textbooks.

7. 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.

8. Use the same textbook for several semesters even if the publisher releases newer editions, or allow students to purchase recent, previous editions. Newer editions may only have minor changes or corrections, and faculty can notify students about relevant revisions to the text.

9. 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. There may need to be collaboration among faculty for this initiative to be effective.

10. Discourage publishers from bundling textbooks with CDs or supplementary materials that are not essential for the course. Require that textbooks and supplementary materials be sold separately instead of bundled together at a higher cost.

11. 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.

12. Develop your own course materials and post them online or have them sold as a bookstore course pack.

13. Use Open Education Resources (OER), which are low-cost or free curated resources. There are multiple places to find OER online, including OpenStax, OER Commons, and MERLOT.
NIU’s University Libraries have developed a guide on textbook affordability for faculty (there is also a section for students, which you may want to share with your classes). A section on accessibility of course materials is also included within the faculty guide.

Summary
According to a 2017 Wakefield study, 85% of students delay or avoid purchasing course materials, 91% of those students cited cost as the reason they delayed or avoided buying course materials, and 50% of students said that delaying or avoiding purchasing materials had negatively impacted their grades (as cited in “Textbook Affordability: Resources and Alternatives,” 2019). 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 the alternatives outlined here. By making conscious decisions about how we choose our textbooks and selecting textbooks that are accessible to our students, we can promote student success and engagement at NIU.

References


