

Cost of Textbooks Taskforce Report

The committee realizes that there is no one single factor that is responsible for the high price of textbooks. We must examine a wide range of issues. This report lists a number of issues and factors that we have identified and offer to the Senate for purposes of discussion.

I. The Bookstore

The Bookstore has a set markup determined by the Board of Trustees. We would like to see the Bookstore managers given a greater degree of freedom in determining markup so that different markups can be applied to different categories of textbooks (e.g., a lesser markup for texts that retail for over \$100). Also the increased profits from the expanded non-textbook business in the new Bookstore could be applied to lowering the cost of textbooks.

II. The Publishers

Textbook publication is a business, and businesses are permitted to make a reasonable profit and to market their product. The taskforce identified several issues:

1. Is the profit margin reasonable? How can we find out? Many small publishers have gone out of business and there have been great many mergers. What does this say about profitability?
2. What would be the consequences of legislated profit caps and requirements in California? Would this affect the number of publishers in business? Would this affect the number of textbooks available for each course, especially the more specialized courses? What has been the experience of K-12 textbook policies?
3. Could colleges themselves or non-profit organizations or foundations publish textbooks?

III. The Used Book Market

The price of a book is determined by two major factors: the cost of production including a reasonable profit and the number of copies that are sold. The price is basically the cost divided by number of copies. Over the past decade the cost has risen while the number of copies sold has gone down, largely because of an efficient and aggressive used book market.

1. The Bookstore subcontracts with a vendor who comes into the Bookstore for the purposes of buying back books. Students receive 30 percent of the new book cost, and the book is resold at 75 percent of the new book cost. The condition of the book is not a factor unless the markings are excessive. (Many students are afraid to markup their books for fear of lessening the sell-back value.)
2. The Bookstore does try to maximize the number of used copies, but there is competition for used books which is why the Bookstore needs to order used books from vendors as early as possible. This is one of the main reasons why book orders are due so far in advance of the start of the semester.
3. Examination copies of texts are sent to faculty for the purpose of review. They should not be sold. They simply enter the used book market which ultimately drives up the cost of books.

4. The committee discussed what to do with examination copies that are not going to be kept or are out of date. The committee recommends that they be donated to “Books for Africa” or some similar organization for distribution in third world countries.

IV. The Students

The committee discussed strategies that students can use to deal with the high price of textbooks. It was also noted that although the price of textbooks is high, it appears to be much higher because it is contrasted with a low tuition and fees. In most colleges and universities, with high tuition and fees, textbooks make up a relatively small part of the total cost.

1. Use copies of textbooks that are on reserve.
2. Establish study groups where texts can be shared.
3. Books can be ordered from the Pierce College Bookstore online and then picked up for a \$5 service fee.
4. Explore the purchase of books from online sources. But be careful to get the correct book. Don't forget to add in the shipping costs. Some sources have free shipping if you order over a certain amount. Perhaps several students can order several books together to save on the shipping costs.
5. Go to the Financial Aid office to see if you are eligible for financial assistance for the purchase of books.
6. Do not resort to copying books. This can end up being costly, and it is illegal.

V. The Faculty

Unlike most commodities, the consumer (i.e., the student) does not select the product. Rather the text is selected for the student by the instructor. The model is like that of a doctor selecting a drug which the patient then purchases. The taskforce believes that instructors can help bring down the cost of textbooks in several ways.

1. Always ask the representative what the price is for any book under consideration. Send the message to the publisher that cost is a consideration in the selection of a textbook. Reps receive commissions for successful adoptions so they are vulnerable to pressure.
2. Let the rep know when you believe that the price is too high. The reps do write reports about what faculty members are saying for their corporate office.
3. Perhaps you or the Bookstore can negotiate a discount as a part of your decision to select a particular text. This has been done.
4. Obviously the most important factor in negotiating a discount is the size of the order. The larger the order, and more the publisher will offer as a way of getting you to select their text. Some suggestions on how to increase the size of the order are:
 - a. Have all or a majority of your faculty teaching a particular course order the same book. (The Taskforce wants to make clear that it reaffirms the right of individual instructors to order the text that, in their judgment, is best for their class.)
 - b. Make a commitment to the Bookstore to use a particular book for two academic years. The Bookstore can then buy a two-year's supply, using the large order to negotiate a significant discount.
5. Do not let a fancy cover, layout, color illustrations, etc., be *the* deciding factor. In fact, if appropriate, point out to the rep that these features are not desired, especially if they drive up the price.
6. If you do not use the add-ons that come with the book, such as CDs, web site access, etc., complain about students having to pay for things they don't need. These “freebies” are not really free. The reps claim that instructors demand these extras, and many undoubtedly do. Let them know that you don't!

7. Order your textbooks as early as possible. This will increase the number of used books that the Bookstore is able to purchase. It also permits the Bookstore to use less expensive, but more time-consuming shipping options.
8. Do not sell complementary copies to book buyers. The copies enter the used book market and drive up the costs of books. If you have copies you don't need, think about donating them (e.g., "Books for Africa").
9. Keep a copy of all textbooks on reserve for those students who can't afford to purchase the book or have to wait until financial aid kicks in. Always ask the sales rep for two copies so you have an extra one to place on reserve.
10. Print the ISBN number of your books in your syllabus to help students identify the correct book if they decide to order from an on-line source.
11. Do not order a textbook that you are not going to use! If you are only going to use a small section of a text, try to find a less comprehensive text.
12. Make a clear distinction between those books that are required and those that are recommended or supplemental.
13. Suggest that students form study groups and find study buddies in class, and share a textbook with other students.
14. Explore the various programs whereby publishers will bind together selected chapters of a book so that students will not have to purchase a large book with chapters they do not need. Explore "books-on-demand" programs.
15. Many older books are now in public domain and have been scanned into files on the web. These can be alternates for students, especially in English classes.
16. Some books may be replaced with free online resources. This is especially true of supplementary materials.
17. If a publisher rep offers you free videos, etc., refuse them because your students ultimately will have to pay for them. Ask for a discount instead. If you do accept, feel guilty!!!
18. Do you really need a text? Many instructors have replaced texts with a selection of less expensive books and online resources. There are a growing number of on-line materials that can be used without cost.
19. Inform students about book grants and financial aid.
20. Let students know that all textbooks are bought back as used books for the same price regardless of condition, unless it is really bad.
21. Let students know when it is possible to use an older edition of a text, especially if they can get a free copy from a friend. Perhaps meet with students to go over the old edition to point out the major differences.
22. Students today are "screen-agers" in that they have relatively short attention spans and are used to elaborate graphics, etc. Textbooks need to appeal to this group.
23. If you loan a student a textbook (for example, until financial aid is approved), you can ask Admissions and Records to put a hold on the student's record if the book is not returned.
24. Explore the availability of "vanilla books," that is low cost alternates to most textbooks.

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