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A Textual Dilemma: College Students and the Rising Cost of Textbooks

Aristotle once said “Education is the best provision for old age,” and most parents would ardently agree with him. The majority of mothers and fathers are aware of the deep-rooted necessity of a higher education in today’s competitive job market. A degree, and the skills necessary to acquire it, will increase the chance of young adults gaining and maintaining prosperity throughout their lives. Many dream of sending their children off to good colleges just as most young adults dream of the life-changing experiences they will benefit from time spent at such a college. A collegiate environment is a necessary transitional period between high school and the real world where today’s youth can be exposed to a wealth of knowledge and life skills that will be instilled in them through thoughtful and challenging educational programs. Being fully aware of this, the many obstacles for parents and students to overcome before the benefits of college can be reaped is frustrating for a great number of individuals.

Only after the arduous process of getting accepted into a good school is finally finished can another uphill battle begin for many families; financing the school that students worked so hard to get into. An extremely lucky group of students have large enough college funds or a full-ride scholarship and thus the financial aspect of school will not be a stress-inducing experience for them. For the national majority however, FAFSA will need to be filled out and scholarships must be applied for. Hopefully a sufficient

amount of money will be allotted to each student in grants and loans so that their tuition is covered, but what about the other expenses of college?

In addition to the basic tuition and fees that each institution charges its' students, there are also housing expenses that can go into the thousands of dollars per year for many college attendees, the expense of laptop computer which is becoming vital for academic success in a technologically academic environment, and lastly the burden of buying a multitude of pricy textbooks each and every semester. This last cost is one that typically hits students the hardest, as most, if not all, of their financial aid funds will have been already committed to other costs by the time book buying rolls around. This typically means that large sum of money most come from the student directly as an out-of-pocket expense.

The rising cost of textbooks in higher education is so great of an issue it has even been brought before the United States Senate as well as thirteen individual state legislatures across the nation. As a college senior graduating this year I have been dealing with these costs consistently over the last four years. My very first semester at a state university as a full-time student cost me approximately \$700 in textbooks. As a freshmen only months out of high school, where books are handout out and picked up at the end of the year, the experience of examining the book's price tags was jarring and my father had to meet me at the bookstore the next day to purchase the mandatory texts as I did not have the money to cover the cost. Experiences like mine are unfortunately the norm rather than the exception to the rule.

Groups have estimated the average cost of textbooks to be between \$700 and \$1,100 annually (Mui). Lower income students and families who are more likely to attend

community colleges and state schools rather than private, and subsequently more expensive institutions, are hit extra hard by this large additional cost as they already struggle to afford tuition. The cost of attending college becomes a real obstacle to the educational advancement of lower-income students who may stop or delay entering into college at all. This is a sad byproduct of the current educational system.

A 2005 report conducted by the United States Government Accountability Office (GOA) on college textbooks found that in the last twenty years prices have increased at twice the rate of inflation and have nearly tripled between December 1986 to December 2004 (United States). This report also found that the cost of books and supplies represented as a percentage as a full-time, degree-seeking student's tuition at a 2 year institution was 72%, at a 4-year public school 26%, and only 8% for a 4-year private school (United States). The cost of school and the mandatory books needed to learn while attending are climbing at a disproportionate and alarming rate. A student who faces these high costs may choose to do without a book which hinders the students learning and classroom discussions because the student is not informed and cannot fully participate. Emilie Mojica, a junior biology major at a four year public school, has dealt with this issue, "My science books are always in the hundreds of dollars and then I have to buy a separate lab manual as well for the majority of my classes. I always buy books for classes that have to do with my major but I skip buying for other classes like English and electives" (Mojica) This coping strategy is counterproductive to the entire higher education system. There is almost no point in attending the class, which may have short lecture times, without the supplement of the textual knowledge that may or may not have been covered in class but was assigned reading instead.

An additional common complaint amongst students is that the pricy textbooks assigned for a class may only be partially used. Another student Kristina Ramirez, a Senior psychology major, finds this frustrating, “ I bought a \$100 abnormal psychology book this semester and we only covered three chapters in it and the rest was handouts and power point information” (Ramirez). Professors should be conscious of the price and the amount of use the student will get out of the text when assigning them and actively look for cheaper alternatives that they can utilize in their classrooms.

Students who are paying for textbooks out of pocket typically have at least a part-time job to help offset living and educational expenses. The minimum wage in Texas is a mere \$7.25 an hour, so if a student had a minimum wage part-time job he or she would have to work almost 28 hours to pay for a \$200 textbook. Having to work while attending school can be detrimental to a students education. A full-time student may be in class 15 hours per week and be expected to put in the recommended 3 hours of studying per credit hour for each class and this in itself is a full time job. Students should also be taking full advantage of socializing and networking on campus as a part of a well-rounded college experience. There are only so may hour in a day and the necessity of a job to finance addition and outrageous educational costs take time away from other commitments that a student would benefit from.

Those associated with the sale of textbooks might disagree with the criticism placed on book prices and publishing and sales practices however. Some contend that prices are high due to new editions being put out every two to three years with only minimal changes to the previous book. Publishers contend that new editions are necessary and the costs have risen due to publishers trying to “fight off an expanding trade in the

used books market” (Mui). The resale of books to the bookstore may be beneficial to the students but it is extremely detrimental to the profits of those who create and sell the books. With the creation of a new edition, any necessary changes are made to make the text as current and relevant as possible as well as allowing the publishers to get back into a profitable return on their investment.

Another addition to textbooks is the concept of bundling material together. Many books are bundled with CD’s, workbooks, and solutions manuals among other supplementary texts and online access codes. These bundles cause the cost of the books go up and many students, myself included, never have the time to utilize the additional items that we were forced to pay for. Publisher’s claim that these bundled packs are “increasingly popular as students require more remediation and universities turn to part-time faculty and graduate students to teach courses” (Mui). This idea that supplementary materials are making up for sub par academic environments is insulting to the those it refers to. A more expensive book that has material that may or may not even be looked at by the student does not solve anything. These bundled packages do accomplish one thing however, “they hinder the student’s chances of selling a textbook bundle back to the bookstore and effect the amount of used copies are available for following semester” (Squires). Not being able to recoup even a fraction of the expense of a textbook is frustrating for the typically broke college student who sometimes counts on that money to help purchase the next semesters set of books. In 2008 a new act, the Higher Education Act, was signed into law stating that students must be provided with pricing information so that may budget for the costs, that faculty be made aware of wholesale prices when ordering books, and also mandates that publishers have to have unbundled components to

accompany the more expensive bundled option (Squire). These changes are a step in the right direction of informed selection but do not combat the fight against rising costs.

One final element that may contribute to the rising cost of textbooks is that of illegal downloading or online postings of copyrighted material. When textbooks are pirated no one involved in the creation, production, or distribution of that textbook is being reimbursed for their work. The companies lose profits and must raise prices to compensate. One extremely popular site that has faced legal issues in the past is Textbook Torrents, who now has “80,000 registered users and 25,000 sessions running at any given time” (Mui). The theft of intellectual material is a crime and should not be condoned or performed by students. However, when one looks at the cost of the textbooks that students need for their education it is easy to see why, if one could get a free copy, that they would be tempted to take it.

Textbook prices are rising at a disproportionate rate to the inflation rate and have almost tripled in the last twenty years. Students are being burdened unnecessarily with these additional costs which are piled on top of already steep tuition and fees. This cost is most detrimental the lower-income students who may be left with no option but to not attend college because they cannot afford books, tuition, and comprehensive living expenses all at once.

There are many possible remedies for these encroaching costs. Buy-back programs are marginally helpful but the constantly changing texts and additional materials being packaged together make buy back impossible in many circumstances. Another option many students use is to learn the ISBN numbers of the texts and search for cheaper copies on Amazon or other such sites. Additionally, many college bookstores

are beginning to offer rental programs where one may rent the text for approximately 50% cheaper than retail price. Faculty can set aside a copy of the text in the reserve section of the school library and this allows students to use the books for free albeit only in the limited library hours or to make copies from the book for a lot less than the purchase price, especially if only a few chapters are being used.

The future might be leading toward digital copies of textbooks on readers such as the widely popular Kindle which is manufactured by Amazon. Digital copies of texts are significantly cheaper and the reader, while moderately expensive, only has to be purchased once. A proposed solution to this urgent issue was made by Joseph Storch, an assistant counsel in the State University of New York's Office of University Counsel, who suggests that schools take part in a shift of education-content distribution and all take part in a single electronic source for all textbook requirements. He suggests a consortium-style agreement between colleges and publishers rather than a relationship between publishers and students. A single price could be charged directly to schools for unlimited access to all materials available and the schools could then work the cost of the digital books into the tuition rate or as a special fee. This solution would help ease the rising prices and create a more contemporary system of distribution in which updated copies could be electronically updated and thus replace the need for new editions that make old editions unusable and untellable.

Some type of reform to the publishing industry must be made to help ease the economic pressure put upon today's students. College is vital for young adults and those from lower-income situations should not be priced out of schools or textbooks. Students, faculty, and parents must raise their unhappy voices and make the publishers, bookstores,

and colleges hear them cry out for relief from the rising costs of textbooks.

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