Swelling Textbook Costs Have College Students Saying 'Pass'

By Susan Kinzie
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A line twisted through the aisles of the bookstore at the University of the District of Columbia, students pushing their heavy baskets full of textbooks along with their feet, some adding up the prices in their heads as they waited.

"Whooooo, it's bad," said Kisha Warren, who's studying art at UDC. "A lot of people don't buy the books," she said, because they're too expensive.

As students come back to campus and get their spring semester assignments, many will pause in the bookstore and make a choice. They can buy everything on the syllabus -- or take a chance.

Sometimes the math is easy: $189.75 for a thick text on principles of management? No thanks.

Textbook prices have been rising at double the rate of inflation for the past two decades, according to a Government Accountability Office study. In Virginia, more than 40 percent of students surveyed by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia said they sometimes just do without.

That's been increasing, said Jennifer Libertowski of the National Association of College Stores; recently, the group found that nearly 60 percent of students nationwide choose not to buy all the course materials.

For those whose parents are writing $40,000-plus tuition checks every year and covering rent for a D.C. apartment, a few books might not seem like a big deal. But for students working to pay for school or for those whose parents sweat every rise in tuition, book prices can be a nasty surprise -- one more thing putting college out of reach.

Students at four-year schools spent, on average, about $900 for books and supplies in 2003-04, more than a quarter of the cost of tuition and fees. At community colleges, the GAO study found, the books amounted to almost three-quarters of the cost.

Because many undergraduates get federal financial aid, the overall cost of college is a concern to Congress, which sought the study.

Textbook prices almost tripled from 1986 to 2004, the GAO report this summer found, in large part because of the increasing cost of developing the things that now often come with the books, such as CD-ROMs, Web sites and workbooks. And publishers revise texts more quickly than they used to, limiting the used-book market.

Every time Warren, 28, buys something for school, she feels as if she's taking away from her two children at
home in Southeast Washington. Then, when she sees their reaction to the drawings and paintings she brings home from UDC, she's all the more sure she has to keep studying: She wants to teach art in city public schools one day. Her 9-year-old daughter and 6-year-old son don't get those kinds of opportunities, she said.

Her urban studies book, which cost about $40, was no problem. But she had to draw the line at a $195 book on design. "I thought that was ridiculous," she said.

"They should figure out a way to get you the books for your class," Warren said. "A lot of people don't have the money."

Kee Tyler was so worried about what he was spending on books in the fall at UDC that he tried to get through music theory without the text, borrowing another student's book for a few minutes each time he went to class.

He learned that trick from someone else. But it got old fast. "If I just missed one class, I was even further behind," he said.

One of his professors gave him a textbook, knowing Tyler, 25, working as a bartender and with a daughter to support, couldn't afford it.

Students have plenty of conspiracy theories for the rising prices: Greedy publishers who change the cover just to charge more. Self-absorbed professors who assign their own masterpieces or forget to list the books till it's too late to find a used copy. Overpriced stores.

"Where college stores come into play, a lot of students automatically perceive a rip-off," Libertowski said. But stores' margin is far lower for textbooks, she said, than for all those sweatshirts and mugs, and it has been steady for years.

The Virginia study found that all the colleges surveyed supported used-book buyback programs, and that many have taken other steps to make books cheaper. James Madison University has a raffle contest to reward professors who submit their reading lists early. At the University of Virginia at Wise, students can make payments throughout the semester, instead of shelling out money for all their books at once.

A few schools have even tried renting out books for the semester. Bills in Congress would provide grants to some schools to launch rental plans and make as much as $1,000 of textbook costs tax-deductible.

In Maryland, a new law created a textbook consortium in the University System of Maryland in hopes of getting them more cheaply in bulk.

Last year, advocates gave Virginia legislators petitions with thousands of signatures, asking them to change the way textbooks are bought and sold. The market is odd, said David Solimini of the student advocacy group Virginia21, because the students usually don't have the choices most consumers do.

During the summer in Virginia, lists of required books went online early, so students could shop around.

And there has been a push for more change this session. Del. G. Glenn Oder (R-Newport News) wants to unbundle books that are packaged with workbooks, CDs and other gimcracks that students might not use.
Bruce Hildebrand of the Association of American Publishers said professors choose which books to assign, and they can choose a simple text or one that includes such things as online tutoring and tests. "The average cost of a new textbook is $52.36," he said. "Did you buy the Corvette or the Ford Fiesta?"

Hildebrand said publishers are trying to help students who aren't as well prepared for college by offering supplements that could help them learn.

Some students, such as Shante Smith, who is supporting a family while she studies at UDC to become a nurse, have scholarships that cover the cost of texts. Warren also gets some aid money for supplies.

And plenty of students come up with their own strategies: Hunting down used copies and selling books back at the end of the semester; buying online, which is sometimes cheaper than the campus store; asking professors to put a copy in the library and waiting around till its free. Or borrowing, copying, taking careful notes in class -- and gambling that the exam questions don't come from the text.

"The last thing I want is a nurse or doctor working on me who didn't buy their anatomy book," Solimini said.

Warren shook her head thinking about her design class, the one with that book she never bought. She dreaded the tests. She did so badly on the first one that she had to take it over again. "That was crazy."

But she made it through, and at the end of the semester, she watched the other students fume when they couldn't sell the book back. "Hundred and ninety-five dollars," she said. "I was sooo glad I didn't buy it."

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