

Massachusetts State Joint Committee on Higher Education  
Hearing on House Bill 1200

Remarks

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss textbooks and course materials, and their role in the education and success of the students of Massachusetts and of the nation.

My name is Sandi Kirshner. I am the Chief Marketing Officer for Pearson Education. I have worked in educational publishing for over 30 years, and I am pleased to represent the over 1,500 Pearson employees who live and work in the Commonwealth – editors, writers, designers, educators, technology developers – who devote their skills and talents to create high quality educational materials that are used locally, nationally, and globally.

The complex issues you have before you today are ones we in the higher education realm deal with everyday. I am personally concerned that so much of the recent debate around textbook costs rarely recognizes how the right textbooks and learning materials coupled with how an instructor uses these materials in the classroom forms the heart of the quality and the success of the education delivered.

In 2006, it was estimated that nearly half of the 14.7 million undergraduates at our two- and four-year institutions will not complete their degrees. What a textbook should cost can be debated, but the price of failure for our students is very high. And, as publishers, we take seriously our responsibility to partner with college faculty to help students succeed.

Let me give you example. MyMathLab is a Pearson product that is improving student grades and retention, while holding down the per student cost of math instruction.

MyMathLab is currently in use on more than 1,600 campuses nationwide, and at 80 colleges and universities in Massachusetts. This online learning program can be purchased with or without a standard print textbook. It contains a fully functional eTextbook, online homework and assessment with immediate feedback, step-by-step tutorials, video lectures, individual student learning plans, and access to math tutors. We also provide faculty training and 24/7 technology support for students.

At Quinsigamond Community College in Worcester since introducing MyMathLab in 2003, the pass rate in the beginning algebra course has increased 42%. We've also been told that use of the program has improved student computer skills, and technical reading and comprehension skills.

MyMathLab sells for \$52.50. It is just one of hundreds of examples of how college publishers in a very competitive marketplace are working to address affordability through innovation that focuses on learning outcomes and results.

I meet with students frequently and I, like you, hear their concerns about the price of education and of textbooks. And, as you consider these concerns, I urge you keep the following points in mind:

Faculty do consider price in making their course content selections. And, the vast majority is rigorous in their selection process. Publishers strongly support transparency and go to great lengths to supply information about their materials to faculty members.

Thanks to the internet, information on textbook prices and products is readily available to the public. A search of less than five seconds can provide hundreds of sources of information to students, parents, and faculty. The fact that students are now buying more than 20% of their course materials online clearly illustrates the impact Internet shopping is having on student purchasing patterns.

Publishers support giving students buying choices and will continue to work to provide format and purchasing options, as a competitive marketplace demands. At Pearson, over 1,000 of our leading textbooks are available in digital format for students to purchase at half the cost of the print version. We also make available many low-cost print options, as well as supporting a large custom publishing program that enables instructors to select just the materials they want for their course – in both print and media formats – and priced to reflect the content selections.

And, we do offer instructors and students “bundles” of selected course materials at price points that reflect a substantial savings over buying the components individually. We also make the vast majority of our materials available for separate sale. Please note there are occasions where materials are intended to be integrated and used together or when third party agreements dictate how the product is to be sold.

The General Accountability Office noted in its 2005 study on textbooks that price is a factor but their conclusion was “the college textbook has evolved from a standalone text to include a variety of ancillary products designed to enhance the education experience for instructors and students.” And, the GAO said, “By increasingly becoming involved in the development of instructional aids, publishers are assuming roles that have traditionally belonged to postsecondary institutions.”

Perhaps this assessment reveals that the college textbook system is complex, and I urge caution in any legislation that may further complicate the issues and overlook the key word – education.

The price of textbooks and course materials is and will continue to be important, but not more important than the success of our students and the reputation of our state colleges and universities as they strive to give students both a degree and an education.

Thank you. I will be happy to respond to any questions you may have.

