



Op-ed: Textbook industry not understood

By Victoria E. Ullmann
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I am an author of a college textbook. I find the criticism of the textbook industry by the chancellor of the Ohio Board of Regents and his proposals to pressure authors and publishers to give away their knowledge improper. His position demonstrates a lack of knowledge of textbook publishing and a lack of foresight regarding the effect of any proposals to pressure companies into providing the product free.

As a publisher, The Dispatch should recognize the problems these proposals present.

College textbooks do not grow on trees. They are the products of thousands of hours of work. My textbook is an employment-law text for undergraduate students.

It took me well over a thousand hours to write this text and more time to go through the peer-review and editing process.

To complete the manuscript, I was required not only to write and format it in accordance to precise publishing standards, I had to create skeleton graphs and charts for the graphic-design team and create all the study aids in the book. I also had to write the instructor's manual. I had to work with a substantive academic editor and a copy editor. It had to be typeset, printed, bound and distributed nationwide. In addition to the peer reviewers, at least six other people had to work on this text to get it to the students.

Textbooks are not like best sellers. They do not sell millions of copies. My book is for an elective subject in a specialized field. I have sold about 60,000 books, which is good for this type of text. My knowledge is worth at least \$150 an hour when I am acting as an attorney in this area of the law for a client. I have made less than minimum wage for sharing this knowledge with students. How much do Dispatch writers make an hour? By law it has to be more than that, at least for employees.

The last time I checked, slavery was illegal in this country, yet apparently it is becoming trendy to think that textbook writers should work free and that publishing houses should give their product away. That is mind-boggling and amazingly offensive. Why isn't the newspaper asking grocery stores and gas companies to give their products away, as well?

Going digital may someday be the answer. But now it would only result in rampant piracy and gross copyright violations by students looking for a cheap out by stealing the

author's work and even selling it on a black market. Textbook publishers do not have the resources that the music industry does to prosecute piracy. Due to the limited nature of textbook publishing, this would mean that the author might well get nothing at all.

Providing online materials would require the textbook publishers to pimp academic works to advertisers, violating every concept of providing real knowledge to students. Although advertising is the mainstay of the newspaper industry, it is unworkable for an academic text. My text provides students not only with the knowledge they need to pass a course but also knowledge that will help them to protect themselves in the workplace. Big companies may well prefer that that knowledge not be widely available. That would limit advertisers for my book and even prevent this kind of work from being published at all.

The Dispatch should rethink its position (editorial, May 3). Imagine if the government demanded that newspapers be given away.