

Rocky Mountain News

Textbook travails

They're costly, but solution isn't to go after publishers
Friday, November 30, 2007

Rising textbook prices are giving students sticker shock at campuses not only in Colorado but across the country. More than a dozen states are considering legislation targeting textbook publishers, and Colorado may join that list next year.

The version of the federal higher education bill that passed the House and is pending in the Senate would also impose new mandates on textbook companies.

The cure would be much worse than the disease, and could easily violate publishers' First Amendment rights.

Here in Colorado, several student organizations are considering pushing for legislation next year that would tackle escalating costs. The legislation could require publishers to disclose when new editions are coming out, so students won't be stuck with obsolete books that have little resale value; inform colleges of the retail and wholesale prices of their publications; and let students buy unbundled versions of texts that do not include CD-ROMs and study guides, because those extras drive up prices. Those moves would mirror provisions in the federal higher-ed bill.

As a matter of principle, we're leery of any moves that would let the government regulate publishers. Forcing a textbook company to disclose its pricing structure might seem harmless. But that mandate could easily morph into price controls, or caps on the profits a publisher can make on its materials.

Price controls would discourage textbook companies from updating their content if new editions are more expensive to produce, shortchanging students in fields where the base of knowledge is constantly evolving, especially science and technology.

Clearly, textbook costs can take a bite out of a student's (or parent's) budget. Recent studies from the Government Accountability Office and the College Board have found that full-time students at public colleges can expect to spend between \$700 and \$1,000 a year on books and related supplies.

Still, a report issued in May by the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance - a panel established by Congress to offer policy advice for the Department of Education - noted that other high-ticket items have risen even faster than textbook costs.

From 1987 to 2004, textbook prices went up by roughly 100 percent, or nearly twice the inflation rate. Meantime, at four-year colleges, room and board costs grew by about 120 percent . . . and tuition and fees soared by nearly 250 percent.

Each of those expenses dwarf textbook costs.

The report, available at www.ed.gov/acsfa, spells out immediate and long-term steps that can be taken to rein in textbook costs.

Many are obvious - encourage students to explore the used textbook marketplace; expect university libraries to keep digital copies of textbooks on reserve so students don't have to buy them; urge publishers to make more materials available online - especially updates; prod universities to join together and purchase popular textbooks in bulk.

Professors can help, too, by not assigning the newest or most specialized texts when more generic, less costly versions have all the necessary information.

The diversity of materials used to teach college students and the decentralized nature of higher education in the United States make cookie-cutter solutions inappropriate, if not unconstitutional. Giving students more power as consumers will let academic freedom flourish.