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## Who Controls Textbook Choices?

Responding to student concerns and in some cases legislative mandates, a growing number of colleges are adopting book rental or buyback programs and urging professors to order books on time so their students have a chance to scour the market for the best deal.

The University of North Carolina is considering going a step further by adopting a plan that would require all its campuses to create a guaranteed rental or buyback program for large, lower-division courses. Faculty members who teach those courses would also be responsible for ordering their textbooks well in advance and agreeing to use the same title for two or three years.

In addition to the above recommendations, a UNC Board of Governors subcommittee also wants colleges to consider the rising cost of textbooks for the average student when deciding on tuition increases.

The proposal passed the board's budget finance committee on Thursday and is set to face the full board today. Robert Nelson, UNC's vice president for finance, said he expects the plan to pass.

Students across the 16-campus system have complained in recent years of the rising cost of textbooks. According to a subcommittee report, most UNC students spend anywhere from \$800 to \$1,200 per year on books. National figures from the College Board show that the cost of books and supplies for the 2005-6 academic year ranged from \$801 to \$904, depending upon the type of institution. (That figure doesn't take into account money earned back from selling textbooks.)

Tuition at Chapel Hill is roughly \$3,450 for in-state students.

A Government Accountability Office study found that college textbook prices have risen at twice the rate of annual inflation over the last two decades, but have not risen as much as tuition costs and other higher education expenses.

A year ago, the textbook cost subcommittee released a report and asked that the 16 campuses report back to the full board this year on what they had done in response to its initial recommendations. The new recommendations, including the call for a mandatory rental-buyback program, are intended to build on those first findings.

The rental-buyback proposal is supported by the UNC Association of Student Governments, which has made lower book costs central to its platform.

Mark Spaulding, president of the Faculty Senate at UNC Wilmington, said he isn't sure if the mandatory programs would be feasible for colleges.

"Faculty are concerned about cost," said Spaulding, an associate professor of history and member of UNC's systemwide faculty assembly. "It's a sticking point. And they don't want to get in a situation where they lose control over choice of books. That's undermining a crucial element of academic freedom."

David Zeigler, chair of the Faculty Senate and an associate professor of biology at UNC Pembroke, said at a faculty assembly meeting he attended, the group "came down on the whole idea because of start-up costs and because they want students to keep their books."

According to the National Association of College Auxiliary Services, it costs roughly \$8 million dollars — not including personnel, storage, etc. — to start up a textbook rental program.

Nelson, the UNC vice president, said the system believes the rental programs would be feasible, in part because they would likely be partial programs in which only selected courses took part. He said individual colleges would decide how to administer the programs.

Spaulding said he would be willing to accept the proposal, but only if it's on a voluntary basis. "Professors shouldn't be compelled to choose a particular book," he said.

Nina S. Allen, chair of the Faculty Senate at North Carolina State University, said she is wary of a systemwide mandate. "If it would save a lot of money for students, it's not such a bad idea," said Allen, a professor of plant biology. "But you have to go campus by campus because what works one place might not work at another."

Allen said the two- or three-year textbook commitment might work for subjects such as calculus or physics but not for biology and other fields where material changes often.

Zeigler said he wouldn't be as opposed to the proposal if it was limited to general education courses. He has doubts as to whether Pembroke has enough students to make a rental program feasible.

Spaulding said he would support college book stores pooling for purchasing power, or pooling for a buyback system.

Already, 10 self-operated bookstores on UNC campuses have formed a consortium that provides more options to students when selling back books. And the subcommittee reported that the percentage of professors ordering their textbooks on time has already increased since the system made that a goal a year ago.

In other states, proposed and adopted legislation to lower book costs has largely focused on sales tax exemptions and ending the practice of bundling of textbooks with supplementary materials.

The UNC proposal also mentions tax exemptions as an option. It says bookstore managers should meet at least quarterly to discuss the UNC buyback consortium and other best practices.

Several colleges in the system, such as Appalachian State University, already have longstanding rental programs.

Bruce Hildebrand, executive director for higher education at the Association of American Publishers, said publishers aren't opposed to rental programs. "It's a school's decision — based on economics of the plan."

But he added that it's difficult to make the programs viable on a large scale. That was the conclusion of a 2005 report from the Illinois Board of Higher Education, which said that while rental programs would provide lower-cost options to students, such programs are inappropriate for the large, research-oriented public universities in the state.

As of spring 2006, textbook rental services were offered by only about 1% of institutions whose bookstores are members of the National Association of College Stores. The association does not have a formal position on rental programs because each situation is unique, according to FAQ on its Web site.

Spaulding, the UNC Wilmington professor, said faculty will be closely following discussions. Changes would likely come early in 2008

"It's far from certain where this thing is going," he said.

— Elia Powers