



Step Too Far on Textbook Costs?

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With students, parents and politicians all frustrated by high textbook costs, recent years have seen many innovations as well as state and federal legislation. Much of the latter has focused on requirements that involve providing information so students and professors can make sound choices. So new laws or proposals call for publishers to provide details about how different editions of books really are, and basic ordering information so students can comparison shop and colleges can have a stock of new and used options.

Legislation passed by the Pennsylvania Senate last week contains similar provisions, but it also features another requirement -- one that is disturbing faculty leaders nationally. The bill requires faculty members at the state's community colleges and universities to select "the least expensive, educationally sound textbooks."

While the Pennsylvania House of Representatives has yet to take up the bill, faculty groups are concerned about it because it would dictate specific choices to professors on which books to select. And while many professors say that they try to avoid expensive textbooks and to select reasonably priced works, many say that they regularly select books that are slightly more expensive than other "educationally sound" options, but that are better.

"This vague and possibly unenforceable standard undermines the right of faculty members to select the best textbook, even if it is more expensive than the alternatives," says a statement issued Friday by the American Association of University Professors [http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/about/pres/let/PAtextbooks.htm]. " 'Educationally sound' also potentially sets a rather low standard for textbook selection. As a legal requirement, it will have a chilling effect on faculty members' ability to exercise their academic freedom in planning courses of the highest quality. Certainly the legislature has no business deciding what is 'educationally sound' in a college classroom. Only faculty members have the capacity to choose the books that best meet their pedagogical aims. If there is a tradeoff to be made between quality and price, only faculty members have the professional competence to make that choice."

The statement adds: "The Pennsylvania legislation is also worrying because it is part of a national trend to regulate textbook selection. Certainly rising textbook prices are a serious matter. Increased availability of electronic versions of textbooks that certainly should prove less

expensive is likely an inevitable feature of a changing marketplace. But the main ways to reduce the expense of a college education are to increase state appropriations to public colleges and universities and to eliminate unnecessary administrative positions."

Cary Nelson, president of the AAUP, emphasized that the association was not calling all measures to reduce textbook costs attacks on academic freedom, and that many of the provisions in the Pennsylvania bill don't raise such issues.

An aide to State Sen. Andy Dinniman said that the legislator would explain why his bill did not intrude on academic freedom, but the senator did not call back. In a news release [<http://www.senatordinniman.com/Releases/2010/June23.htm>] he issued after the bill was passed, however, he said: "I am not interested in and do not want to limit the rights of faculty to select appropriate textbooks. All I want to do is make sure that when textbooks and course materials are selected, that student cost is factored into the equation."

Even student advocates for curbs on textbook prices have generally stopped short of dictating faculty choices -- and have not rushed to endorse the Pennsylvania legislation. Nicole Allen, textbooks advocate for the Student Public Interest Research Groups, said that she appreciated that "the legislators in Pennsylvania had their hearts in the right place," but she said that her group has generally backed bills "to give professors the tools they need" to make less costly selections, but not legislation to restrict faculty choices.

Allen noted that a survey of faculty members for a 2007 report [<http://www.studentpirgs.org/textbooks/reports/exposing-the-textbook-industry>] by her organization found that 94 percent of professors said that -- given two equally good options -- they would assign the less expensive choice. But the survey found that 37 percent of professors said that they don't know the prices of the books when they are making decisions. These results, Allen said, suggest that faculty members need more options and better information, but that they should then be left to make the decisions.

"The most important thing is for students to receive a sound education," she said. "To undercut quality for the sake of costs doesn't make any sense."

— Scott Jaschik