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Bill would help make textbooks affordable

Multistate effort would tell professors of costs, changes

By Eric Swedlund

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Congress and several state legislatures are advancing measures designed to halt the rapid price increase of college textbooks by requiring publishers to disclose the books' cost to professors and outline any substantive changes in new editions.

In Arizona, a bill backed by university students and professors is the latest in a series of steps pushed by a student-run campaign to make textbooks affordable. Identical bills have been introduced in the House and Senate, and while hearings haven't been scheduled, the backing of key lawmakers is promising, student leaders say.

Textbook costs for Arizona students are on par with the national average of roughly \$900 to \$1,000 per year.

According to a 2005 federal study, textbook costs rose at four times the rate of inflation over the previous decade.

Students, professors and supportive lawmakers view the proposals as consumer-protection measures that can give students lower-cost options.

Price-disclosure legislation is a key component of the national Make Textbooks Affordable campaign, said Nicole Allen, spokeswoman for the coalition of Public Interest Research Groups and student associations involved. Similar laws have passed in five states and are being considered in at least seven more.

"What unites all these bills is they require publishers to disclose prices to faculty," Allen said.

The Government Accountability Office report cited several practices in the textbook industry that contributed to the rapid price increase, including the more frequent release of new editions and the "bundling" of books with CD-ROMs and other instructional supplements.

In addition to the disclosure measures, both the federal legislation and the Arizona bills would mandate that textbooks that are bundled with supplemental materials also be available separately.

The Arizona legislation has the support of state Rep. Jennifer Burns, a Tucson Republican who chairs the higher education committee. Burns has scheduled a hearing on the bill this month.

"We're trying to bring some light to the cost and some discussion so faculty are aware of it and think about the price when they're thinking

One student's experience

Seema Patel, a UA junior studying microbiology, has turned to online sellers like Amazon.com and other alternatives after spending about \$700 on books for just one semester last year.

"I had to find alternate sources because it just wasn't sustainable," said Patel. "There's no way I could have afforded to spend that much again."

That semester, Patel was loaded down with science books, all of which she had to buy new. Two of them — for calculus and organic chemistry — came "bundled" together with solutions manuals that weren't necessary but added around \$30 to the cost of each book.

"Students should have the ability to choose what books they need and don't need for a class," Patel said. "When you bundle them together, you're forcing them into things they don't need. Especially for the calculus class, I was mad because I didn't open the solutions manual once."

Patel said she hasn't had much luck hunting for used books or selling books back. One \$110 book earned her a \$9 buyback.

She supports proposed legislation aimed at requiring publishers to disclose more information, such as whether new editions have

about which book to choose," Burns said.

The disclosure laws won't completely solve the issue of high textbook costs but would enable students to align with professors to seek out the best textbook options, said Tommy Bruce, the University of Arizona student body president.

"There's this inherent disconnect because the faculty don't have to purchase the textbook. The students do, but the faculty don't know what they're spending," said Bruce, who has spent as much as \$775 on a semester's required books.

Bruce said students have documented such insignificant changes as a new cover, reordered chapters and slight differences in problem sets in new editions of textbooks. On occasions, professors advise students that past editions are sufficient for the needs of a class.

"If professors were given the option and saw that the only change was a switch between the order of chapters five and six, they could keep the current edition," Bruce said.

The UA Faculty Senate last week approved a resolution supporting the legislation, which Faculty Chair Wanda Howell said couldn't be delayed. Both students and faculty members agreed that a unified front will put the bill in a stronger position.

Bruce said student groups have turned to lawmakers because changes they can accomplish on their own campuses already have been achieved.

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She supports proposed legislation aimed at requiring publishers to disclose more information, such as whether new editions have substantial changes that make the expense worthwhile. Publishers are taking unfair advantage of students who are forced to buy high-priced books, she said.

"I think that different state governments need to put pressure on publishers to stop coming out with books every year that just have a few pages different," Patel said. "It's frustrating that publishers profit on situations like that."

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