



Petition drive backs free online textbooks

Costs of college course materials inflated by publishers, students say

By Matt Krupnick, STAFF WRITER

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Seeking to slow steadily rising textbook costs, about 1,000 U.S. college instructors have signed a petition vowing to choose cheaper — and even free — reading materials.

Prompted by a national student group, the petition in particular aims to increase the use of open textbooks, or those offered for free online. The average college student pays between \$650 and \$900 per year on textbooks.

Most professors have not considered free online books, said Genki Hara, a University of California, Berkeley, geography major who helped organize the petition drive. Because instructors drive the textbook market with their buying choices, it's important to let them know about all options, Hara said.

"We want to make a more viable system for open textbooks," he said. "This (petition) definitely helps let people know that there's support for them."

Students have escalated criticism of textbook publishers in recent years, accusing them of heavily marketing the most expensive materials and combining them with unnecessary software that adds to the price. Critics also claim publishers update textbooks needlessly after just a couple of years, which outdates older editions.

Representatives of the Association of American Publishers could not be reached Tuesday, but they have said in the past that professors are never forced to buy specific materials. Books are only updated when necessary, the industry group said.

Among the instructors to sign the petition was Darin Jensen, who teaches a UC Berkeley geography course. Jensen said he swore off textbooks six years ago in favor of a \$28 reader that combines materials from several sources.

Online textbooks would be a welcome tool, he said.

"Unfortunately, there's no open textbook available for the course I teach," he said. "I would like to see the concept used here at Berkeley."

Free-textbook proponents say the shortage of suitable online materials is a problem, but some prototypes exist.

For example, the book "Introduction to Economic Analysis" by California Institute of Technology professor R. Preston McAfee has been adopted at a handful of campuses, say enthusiasts of the new model. The

328-page text can be downloaded quickly from McAfee's Web site.

McAfee could not be reached for comment, but his site explains his rationale for offering the free book.

"Academics do an enormous amount of work editing journals and writing articles, and now publishers have broken an implicit contract with academics, in which we gave our time and they weren't too greedy.

"Many have gotten so dumb ('simplified') so as to be simply incorrect. And they want \$100 for

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Professors Gone Paperless

Continuing their [campaign](#) to draw attention to the cost of textbooks, the Student Public Interest Research Groups celebrated Tuesday what they're calling a major milestone — reaching [1,000 professors](#) who've [signed a statement](#) supporting the use of free, online and open source textbooks.

[Colleges](#) and individual faculty members continue to experiment with putting course information and material online, and “open textbooks” typically are licensed to allow users to download, share and alter the content as they see fit, so long as their purposes aren't commercial and they credit the author for the original material. This allows instructors to customize e-textbooks and offer them to students for free online or as low-cost printed versions.

By signing the statement, professors promise to include open textbooks in their search for course materials. “As faculty members,” the statement says, “we affirm that it is our prerogative and responsibility to select course materials that are pedagogically most appropriate for our classes. We also affirm that it is consistent with this principle to seek affordable and accessible course materials for our classes whenever possible.”

While noting that the supply of open textbooks is still “admittedly small,” the research group says the statement of solidarity is a step toward “giving commercial publishers a run for their money.”

Bruce Hildebrand, executive director for higher education at the Association of American Publishers, said “any faculty member or group that is willing to make that level of commitment to provide a free textbook, I applaud them.”

But he said the content creators should keep in mind the need to keep information current, offer supplemental educational tools and built-in class management systems (for grading purposes), and ensure that the cost of instruction doesn't rise with the use of the online material.

As with much of free online content, some open textbook chapters and academic articles have caught the attention of a wide audience, and others haven't. It takes years for a traditional textbook to move through the review and revision process, and professors undertaking these online projects know that they are always a work in progress.

Here are three professors who have gone from assigning traditional print textbooks to writing their own online versions:

An Information Scientist's Experiment — 10 Years In

1998 was the last time that John Gallaughar, an associate professor of information systems at Boston College's Carroll School of Management, used a traditional print textbook. He assigned it to his graduate-level introductory course in information systems. The book cost about \$150. He also assigned supplemental reading — trade press articles, online case studies and the like. Student feedback was clear: The textbook cost was too high, and they valued the supplemental material more.

He agreed on the price complaint, calling some versions “oppressively expensive.” So Gallaughar stopped assigning the textbook and began developing syllabuses from existing online materials, including his own. He's posted PowerPoint slides and podcasts of his lectures [online](#) ever since.

Gallaughar's is a fast-moving field, and his area of research — market formation and the role of technology — lends itself to online experimentation. To no fault of textbook authors, by the time an edition reaches bookstores it can already be outdated.

Gallaughar said he still looks at offerings from publishers and would consider using printed textbooks again. “I'm making the decision mostly on quality and not price, but if there's just 20 percent of the content that I want to use and I'll end up supplementing it anyway, I can't justify that purchase.”

Over the years, Gallaughar has amassed a lengthy collection of his online assignments and academic work. He's working with a publisher to create a textbook out of that material. The idea is that professors can use the entire free open textbook or assign and customize individual chapters. A printed, paperback version for \$25 will also be available — and Gallaughar said he'll likely accept a small royalty.

“It'd be nice to be compensated as an author, but it's not my primary goal that drives this,” Gallaughar said.

With the help of the publisher, Gallaughar can track who's looking at the textbook. He said he's not concerned about misuse of the information, because people in his field can pick out and quickly discredit bad information.

An Economist Embraces Open Source

R. Preston McAfee, a professor of business economics and management at the California Institute of Technology, said more than any other question, he gets asked whether he's concerned that his open source content will be mangled and his name unfairly attached to shoddy work.

“My answer is generally no, I'm not worried about that — there are 50 other ways you can do the same thing to me,” said McAfee, who's at Yahoo while on leave from Cal Tech. “I would only really object if someone puts up another version and a third party decides to quote me on it.”

Several years ago, Cal Tech asked McAfee to teach a principles of economics course. Instead of using one of the traditional textbooks, which went for more than \$100, McAfee decided on creating his own [version](#), which he calls “The Open Source Introduction to Microeconomics.”

Under his licensing agreement, McAfee controls his original copy of the online textbook but can't

necessarily track if others make changes on their own versions. He asks that users make a good faith effort to cite him on the original work, and that they don't use the material for commercial purposes. The hope, though McAfee said it hasn't happened yet, is for colleagues to offer competing versions that incorporate some of his chapters.

Students can read the textbook free online or buy a printed copy for \$11. McAfee said he doesn't take royalties. Of the 60,000 people who have visited his site, fewer than 10 percent downloaded the book. McAfee said he is planning to work with a publisher on an updated version of the textbook and will take royalties from printed copies, given that the publisher in that case makes a profit on sales.

McAfee said embracing open source content is most crucial for professors in fields like his, where the information isn't rapidly changing, because it's a way to give another option to students who often complain that publishers create new additions with few substantive changes. (Hildebrand, for his part, has pointed out that professors regularly cite the importance of the supplemental material that comes with the new editions.)

A Mathematician's New Assignment

"The world doesn't need another linear algebra textbook on the market — it needs a free one." That's been the mission statement of late for Rob Beezer, a professor of math and computer science at the University of Puget Sound.

Beezer has worked on his project, an [open source math textbook](#), for roughly four years. He's coded it in language that will look familiar to other mathematicians and chemists who want to edit the information.

Like the other professors, Beezer once used a printed textbook that cost more than \$100. And like the other online alternatives, Beezer's is free for students and professors to use. He is planning on releasing a new edition this summer, a soft-bound book for \$24.50. (Beezer gets \$5 in royalties from each copy.)

He is asking students to bring \$25 on the first day of class to cover the costs of printing and binding copies of the book. Beezer said he encourages students to have the printed version because it's helpful to write in the margins.

While Beezer said he doesn't expect to get rich from the sales of his printed version, he hopes to spread his work — two courses outside his university just started using the book. And he'd like to demonstrate that professors who provide free content can eventually make it financially worth their while.

"Once people get over the 'you get what you pay for' syndrome, they'll try this out and see the benefits," he said.

— [Elia Powers](#)

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at
<http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/04/16/textbooks>.*

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News

Faculty members fight high cost of textbooks

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By Eleanor Chute, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

In choosing between two good textbooks for an honors mathematical studies course, Carnegie Mellon University professor Robert Pego employed a bit of economics.

He chose the one that lists for about \$60 hardbound, not the one that lists for \$166.

"Why should I make students pay that?" he said.

Dr. Pego is among faculty members nationwide who are paying attention to how much textbooks cost and trying to do something about it.

He and hundreds of other faculty members have signed a statement of intent to use free, online, open-source textbooks whenever academically appropriate.

The statement is part of an effort by the Student PIRGs -- Public Interest Research Groups -- which expect to announce tomorrow that they have reached 1,000 faculty signatures.

Like college tuition, the price of textbooks has soared faster than inflation. From 1986 to 2004, textbook prices nearly tripled, according to a Government Accountability Office report in 2005.

The GAO said the best explanation for the increase is the development of new products accompanying the books, like CDs and other supplements.

Nationwide, the GAO figured that textbooks were about a fourth of the cost of tuition and fees at four-year public colleges and universities and as much as three-quarters of the cost of tuition and fees at two-year public institutions.

Carnegie Mellon estimates that books and supplies cost students \$966 a year. Pitt estimates it at \$600 to \$1,000 a year.

Nicole Allen, Student PIRGs textbook project director, said textbook prices for a course can exceed tuition at community colleges in California.

"It can really be a tipping point expense for lower- and middle-income students. They have to face a difficult decision whether to drop out, take on more loan debt or undercut their own learning by forgoing purchasing textbooks," she said.

Examples of some of the available open textbooks, which generally are free if used for noncommercial purposes, are on the Web site, www.maketextbooksaffordable.com.

The list includes texts on physical oceanography, economic analysis, physics, linear algebra,

probability and programming.

The Student PIRGs also are pushing Congress to address the textbook price issue.

The House version of the Higher Education Reauthorization Act, which is in conference committee, would require publishers to tell faculty the price of the book, the history of revisions and whether any lower-cost formats are available.

It also would require publishers to offer textbooks separately rather than only bundled with other materials like CDs. And it would require schools, to the "maximum extent practical," to put the list of required texts in registration materials so students would have time to shop for lower prices.

J. James Bono, a doctoral student and teaching fellow in English at the University of Pittsburgh who signed the statement, said the total cost of the books for just one of his graduate level classes he took was \$400 if purchased new.

Last week, he was headed to Hillman Library to pick up a box of 15 to 20 books he had requested. He also belongs to the New York Public Library, which has an on-demand print service for materials in the public domain.

But, he said, "the lead time is sometimes a problem."

For students in the writing for the public class he teaches, Mr. Bono said, "I try to use open source and freely available materials when I can."

He still has a textbook for the class he teaches, but it replaces a more expensive book and has been in use for a while, so students are more likely to find a used copy. [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) lists the book at \$59.60 new, but also shows used copies as low as \$7.99. He supplements the book with freely available materials.

Of his seminars, he said, "I've noticed my faculty members increasingly using online resources and distributing them digitally."

Juan Manfredi, a math professor at Pitt who signed the statement, said he thinks demand will shift toward customized materials that use only parts of big textbooks. He compares that to the music industry, in which many consumers buy individual songs over the Internet rather than a whole CD.

"I don't like the fact that regular calculus books cost \$150," he said. "They pack everything into the book -- the material for calculus 1, 2 and possibly 3. Some students might not take the three courses."

This term, his honors class on introduction to analysis is using a regular textbook because Dr. Manfredi couldn't find a suitable alternative. [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) sells the book for about \$112.

For some other courses, he has turned to a publishing house that offers books in the public domain for \$10 to \$30.

"I always look for alternatives," he said. "These days, with easy Internet access, there are more and more resources available. We have more and more opportunities to provide affordable information."

"I think it's only a matter of time before we can rely essentially on some sort of electronic distribution of textbook materials."