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As textbook prices skyrocket, college students and faculty seeking more affordable options increasingly are turning to "open textbooks" as an alternative.

Open textbooks are free textbooks available online that are licensed to allow users to download, customize and print any part of the text. Professors can change content to fit their teaching styles. Some authors offer a print-on-demand service that produces professionally bound copies for \$10 to \$20.

Textbook prices have outpaced inflation 2-to-1 in the past two decades, says a 2005 report by the Government Accountability Office. They account for 26% of tuition and fees at four-year public universities and nearly three-quarters of costs at community colleges, the GAO says.

Open textbooks can change the way textbooks are used, produced and sold, says Nicole Allen, director of the Make Textbooks Affordable campaign by Student Public Interest Research Groups.

The non-profit student advocacy network has been pushing for open textbooks since 2003, hoping the format catches on so prices will decrease and bring some relief.

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"The way we're going to lower prices in the long run is by giving viable options," Allen says. "Right now the publishers have a stronghold on the market. What we're trying to do is expand the market and instigate a market shift."

Allen is leading an effort to gather signatures for an Open Textbook Statement of Intent, which asks faculty to consider using open textbooks. The statement (published at www.maketextbooksaffordable.org) has more than 1,200 signatures from faculty in all 50 states in schools ranging from community colleges to four-year universities to graduate schools.

In California, the Foothill-De Anza Community College District is beginning a project that will train professors to find and use open resources. The goal is to have participants eventually produce their own open textbooks.

Some in the publishing industry have noticed the trend.

Eric Frank spent seven years working for Pearson Education, one of the nation's leading textbook publishers, before quitting last year to pursue a new business venture. He spent three months talking to students, teachers and authors about textbooks, trying to find a solution to their complaints.

It became clear that open textbooks would provide the ideal solution, Frank says.

"The current business model fails the students, the faculties and the authors," he says. "Students are used to having choices in what to buy; instead they're getting the same thing they got 50 years ago and paying a lot for it. Instructors have different teaching styles, but a one-size-fits-all cookie-cutter book never allows them to deliver it. The authors are getting paid less and less for their book.

"We flip the model completely."

Frank and his business partner, Jeff Shelstad, in January plan to launch Flat World Knowledge, the first commercial open textbook publisher. It will offer free online textbooks that can be printed and bound, for about \$25 for black and white and \$35-\$39 for full-color copies. The average price of a traditional textbook varies by subject; many new textbooks cost about \$150, Allen says.

Instructors will be able to modify the content, and authors will be compensated "at least as well as the traditional model." Frank is recruiting authors, who will receive royalties for texts and supplementary materials such as study guides.

Several authors already have embraced the open format by writing their own textbooks and putting them online at no cost.

Bob Stewart, a professor of oceanography at Texas A&M University, refused offers to have his *Introduction to Physical Oceanography* published the traditional way in favor of writing an open textbook.

Stewart writes in his preface that the book is "a gift ... to the students of the world." It is distributed through the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Students in China are using it to learn oceanography and English; translations are in the works, including Italian and Portuguese editions.

Rob Beezer, a professor at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Wash., says he wrote *A First Course in Linear Algebra* mainly because he was frustrated with the frequent new editions publishers release every few years. He decided to write his own textbook in 2004, basing it on his lecture notes. Students can download it, print it or buy a soft-cover copy for \$24.50.

Beezer earns \$5 for every professionally bound copy sold and uses the money to update the content. He pays students who find mistakes in the book.

"This has been happening for 10 years with research articles, and I think textbook publishing is next," he says. "Now there's room for people like myself to put something together, and I think you're going to see more of that."

Allen hopes the influx in open-textbook authors and users represents a sign of things to come.

"The open textbooks that are out there serve as proof that it is possible to have a high-quality open textbook that is being used in classrooms," she says. "They might just be the thing that will change the textbook industry for the better."

READERS: How have you coped with rising textbook costs? Do you think the 'statement of intent' is a useful tool?

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