

Atlanta Journal Constitution
November 26, 2004

OUR OPINIONS: Chapter and purse **As the cost of college textbooks climbs, educators and students can take steps to offset the outlay**

Staff Friday, November 26, 2004

The rising cost of college textbooks has been declared an issue of national interest, with the Government Accountability Office ordered to investigate.

In Georgia, a Board of Regents task force has come up with a dozen ideas to trim book costs, including a state income tax deduction for textbooks.

The price of textbooks "has a growing impact on college affordability," Bill Bowes, vice chancellor of the University System of Georgia, warned this month.

Even with the HOPE scholarship, books are taking a bigger bite of students' funds. HOPE covers only \$300 for books each year, less than half of what most students shell out.

There's no doubt that higher costs, whether for books, board or tuition, are a financial strain for some students and their families. But before deciding on a course of action, national and state leaders should first find the most accurate way to measure the pain.

Georgia's regents, for example, were told that textbooks can account for as much as 20 percent of the total cost of college. The same figure is reported by the California Student Public Interest Research Group and widely repeated by textbook cost critics. But it is based on tuition costs in California during the 2003-2004 school year and the prices of widely assigned textbooks.

Figures from the College Board, a nonprofit organization of colleges and universities, offer a different perspective. Books and supplies cost the average student at a public four-year school \$817 during the 2003-2004 year, or less than 8 percent of the total cost of \$10,636, according to the College Board.

In Georgia, the University of Georgia estimates that books cost its students about \$700 in the last school year. That's less than 6 percent of all costs for state residents, and 3 percent for nonresidents, who pay more for tuition and so have a higher total cost.

The weakness of measuring textbooks as a share of total costs is that total costs can vary from state to state, college to college, and even student to student.

A better way to judge the impact may be to look at percentage increases in textbook costs. UGA estimates books and materials will cost the average student \$750 this school year. That's a 7 percent hike in a year and well above both consumer inflation and the growth in prices charged by book publishers in general.

If that's an unacceptable rate of increase, then cooperation is needed from all the parties involved to slow it down. So far, instead of a national debate, it's been an exercise in finger-pointing.

Book publishers have been accused of gouging students and pressuring teachers to order books packaged with teaching aids and supplemental material, which can significantly increase the cost. Publishers blame teachers for ordering the packages and complain that colleges have a conflict of interest when it comes to book prices. That's because some colleges receive a commission on books and other items sold at bookstores managed by third parties.

Universities, publishers and students alike have shown little enthusiasm for online versions of textbooks and related material, even though their use can reduce costs. Publishers say there is no market for online versions; colleges say students prefer paper texts.

However, the University of Phoenix, a for-profit system with a national presence, converted to electronic books several years ago, in part to reduce costs and therefore compete better for students.

Previously, the university's students --- mostly working adults --- used standard college textbooks, according to Shane Clem, who directs the school's operations in Georgia. The cost ranged from about \$70 to \$200 per book, he said. The customized online textbooks and materials that students now use run about \$60 per course for undergraduates.

There are other ways to reduce costs, however. Colleges are trying to increase the supply of used books, which are cheaper. Students can cut their outlay by reselling textbooks, ordering online when possible, and buying paperback versions instead of hardcover ones when possible.

Faculty can resist ordering books with all the bells and whistles, if the add-ons aren't needed.

"We've all got to come together on this," said Wayne Reed, a Georgia State University administrator and member of the Regents' textbook task force. That includes bookstores, publishers, faculty and students, he said.

Reed is right. Controlling the cost of college textbooks will require everyone to be on the same page.