

Reducing the Cost of Textbooks for PCC Students

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BACKGROUND

The rapidly rising cost of textbooks for college students has become an issue of local and national concern. Several recent studies have concluded that the price of textbooks has far outpaced the rate of inflation.¹ PCC is no exception. An August 2005 informal cost analysis conducted by Diane Mulligan, Dean of Student Services (SY), revealed that the average cost of textbooks for a typical, full time student ranged from \$390 to more than \$600 based on program of study, making access increasingly prohibitive. In fact, the spring 2005 Sylvania Student Campus Climate Survey found that textbook affordability is the number one concern for students, outranking even student parking.

In Fall 2005 the Educational Advisory Council (EAC) formed a Textbook Task Force (TTF) to study how PCC SACs, Faculty, Bookstore, Library, Financial Aid Office, and ASPCC can work together to create affordable options for students. After months of deliberation, including feedback through public forums sponsored by the Teaching Learning Centers on all three PCC campuses, the TTF following "Recommendations to Faculty and SACs" were approved by the EAC on March 15, 2006 and are suggested for consideration at April 13, 2006 SAC Meetings and thereafter. Additional recommendations action at the PCC District and state/federal levels will be presented by the TTF to the EAC for future consideration..

¹ For example, see Rip-off 101: How the current practices of the textbook industry drive up the cost of college textbooks. CALPIRG Higher Education Project. January 2004. As of October 31, 2005 available at <http://calpirg.org/CA.asp?id2=11987&id3=CA&>.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO FACULTY AND SACS

1. Complete **all parts** of the *Book Order Form*, promptly meeting all ordering deadlines established by the PCC Bookstore.

This saves costs by providing information to the Bookstore that will 1) facilitate book buy-backs thereby increasing the availability of less expensive used texts, and 2) support correct quantities ordered thereby a) reducing shipping costs for unsold copies that are returned to the publisher, b) ensuring unsold copies can be returned to the publisher in a timely fashion, and c) making the warehousing of unsold copies more efficient. Doing all of this may allow the Bookstore to reduce its markup (applied to textbooks to enable the Bookstore to break even) resulting in significant cost savings to students.

Strategies for implementation: Revisions to the *Bookstore Order Form* will provide more detailed information for use by the PCC Bookstore to help reduce costs. As orders are moved online, it is anticipated that compliance will be enforced by requiring all fields to be filled in before the order is accepted and processed.

Notes: Students may purchase textbooks from online and other sources. Faculty need to be aware that encouraging this practice undermines the efficiencies achieved through this recommendation, resulting in higher costs paid by students buying textbooks at the PCC Bookstore, including those students on financial aid who must purchase their textbooks there.

2. Discourage bundling under most circumstances.

This saves costs by 1) allowing the PCC Bookstore to more efficiently buy-back textbooks thereby increasing the supply of used copies that may be purchased by students at a lower cost, 2) requiring students to pay for only those items that are required for a course, which may not be everything in an automatically generated, publisher-driven bundle, and 3) reducing the costs to publishers who often provide complimentary texts to instructors who may not be making full use of the supplementary materials.

Strategies for implementation: Negotiate with the publisher. If a bundle is under consideration, try to ensure 1) that the cost of the bundle is not greater than the cost of the sum of the individual items if purchased separately either new or used, and 2) that requiring all items in a bundle would not prevent the purchase of those items, new or used, separately.

Notes: Many students prefer not to buy bundled textbooks and instead purchase materials separately, as needed.

Bundling complicates the ordering process for the Bookstore (resulting in warehousing, shipping, and other costs) if all items in a bundle are not required because 1) it is difficult to determine how many bundled sets versus new individual textbooks to order, and 2) it is hard to guess how many texts to purchase from used booksellers.

Bundling also undermines the used textbook market by making the PCC Bookstore buy-back process more difficult. While the PCC Bookstore will usually buy back bundles it sells as long as all items in the opened bundle are able to be sold together during the following term, if only some items are required for a course it can be unclear how many of the non-required items should be kept in stock. Furthermore, if any required item in a bundle (like a CD or coded access to a website) is sold for one-time use and is unavailable for sale separately from the bundle, then the Bookstore will not buy-back any of the items

in the bundle! Even inclusion of “free” items in a bundle (like a “free” dictionary) can make the buy-back process more complex and costly, when all warehousing and other expenses, as well as lost buy-back opportunities for students are taken into account.

Looked at from many angles, therefore, what may appear to be a money-saving bargain for students is often just a financial windfall for the publishers. Under most circumstances, bundling will drive up textbook costs unless all items bundled are new editions for the first term of use, in which case used copies of those items are not yet available.

3. Encourage competition between publishers to lower prices.

This saves costs by leveraging PCC’s market power for the benefit of our students. PCC is one of the three largest community colleges in the U.S. and is the single largest post-secondary educational institution in Oregon. The results can be dramatic:

In a recent experiment, a PCC Biology Instructor realized a 40% reduction in the price of a textbook by negotiating the price with the publisher.

Strategies for implementation: Effective communication among faculty teaching the same course is helpful, as well as a willingness to negotiate lower prices with publishers. Faculty should consider narrowing their textbook selection to three high-quality choices and then negotiate prices across publishers to encourage a price adjustment. Planning ahead is often necessary, too, as successful negotiations may require commitment to use a text for one to two years.

4. Consider adopting the same textbooks for the same courses across all PCC campuses or, at a minimum, consult with colleagues to encourage agreement across multiple instructors.

This saves costs by 1) increasing leveraging power with publishers through high-quantity orders, and 2) allowing students to take different sections of a course at other campuses and from other instructors without purchasing a new book. This is especially helpful in sequenced courses.

Strategies for implementation: Effective communication among faculty teaching the same course on different campuses is needed. Attendance of all full and part time faculty at SAC Meetings or retreats is most helpful in achieving this level of communication.

Notes: While nearly half of PCC SACs provide for “instructor discretion” regarding the selection of textbooks, voluntary cooperation among faculty to standardize textbook selection will better support students who desire easy transition across course sections and campuses. Students are upset by the need to buy new textbooks for courses (especially sequenced courses) is simply because they are taught by different instructors.

5. Consider having publishers produce a custom text.

This saves costs by eliminating chapters that are not needed, changing content from color to black and white, and/or producing paperback versions, for example, thereby lowering the price from the original version. Furthermore, faculty may be able to re-arrange chapters in ways better suited for the course syllabus. An example from the PCC Bookstore shows the potential for lowering prices:

In spring 2005 a Sociology title sold for \$98.80 new and \$71.85 used. In spring 2006, after customizing the text, it sells for \$41.60 new and \$31.20 used, a 57% savings for students!

Strategies for implementation: While it may be practical for a single faculty member to arrange for a custom text to be used, effective communication among many faculty who are teaching the same course may be necessary. Successful negotiations with a publisher may require commitment to sell a minimum number of copies over a set period of time.

Notes: These publisher requirements also may be to the advantage of students by supporting the book buy-back/used textbook market. The Bookstore will buy back all custom texts ordered for use in the following term anywhere within the PCC system.

6. Place a copy of every textbook ordered on Library Reserve on the campus in which the course is taught.

This saves costs by providing students who are unable to afford a textbook a no-cost option.

Strategies for implementation: Request complimentary copies from the publisher. If the publisher is unwilling, consider using departmental funds, requesting Library assistance, or seeking other funding sources to purchase at least one copy for each campus on which the course is taught. Increased use of Library Reserve should be promoted by education and outreach to faculty and SACs by Library staff.

Notes: While Reserve copies may reduce PCC Bookstore sales, this can be off-set by Bookstore orders and need not result in a significant number of unsold copies. Most publishers are agreeable to providing a small number of complimentary copies for this purpose. Distance Learning students may best be served by placing copies on reserve at various PCC campuses as well as other locations relatively convenient to them.

7. Consider ordering fewer textbooks or not ordering a particular textbook at all if less than 50% of the content is required for the class.

This saves costs by making it easier for the Bookstore to place more accurate orders, thereby reducing PCC employee handling, return postage and overstock warehousing expenses, as noted above. This savings can be passed on to students in the form of a lower PCC Bookstore mark up.

Strategies for implementation: Work with the PCC Library to pursue textbook alternatives, for example 1) *electronic Course Packs* composed of full text articles, e-books, and other electronic information already in the library, 2) *persistent links* to relevant Library resources that may be embedded directly into PCC course pages, and 3) non-text Library resources such as novels, journal articles, collections of readings, etc. This saves costs by requiring no money be spent by students. Students may utilize articles and library resources chosen by faculty for their courses, thereby making effective use of information already available in the PCC Library as well as other libraries to which PCC has approved access.

8. Require and/or encourage students to share textbooks when appropriate.

This saves costs by encouraging students to share expenses and may work in tandem with study groups or other group projects where these methods are an integral part of the course's structure.

Strategies for implementation: Individual faculty, or those working together to adopt similar internal course activities, will need to balance the convenience of having students each own their textbooks with the costs saved by sharing.

Notes: Voluntary sharing may make it difficult for the Bookstore to order the proper quantity of textbooks, adding to the Bookstore costs as described above. If sharing were required, however, the appropriate number of textbooks could be reflected in the Bookstore order.

9. Sale of complimentary textbooks for personal gain by any PCC employee should not occur under any circumstances.

This saves costs for the publisher who otherwise has to factor the cost of “free” textbooks into the price of those sold for profit. While the same issue can be made about requesting complimentary copies to be placed on Library Reserve, from an ethical and legal point of view there is no personal gain to the employee placing an item on Reserve, while significant benefits are realized by students who use Library Reserve.

Strategies for implementation: One or more of the following: 1) Inform publishers and reps to not send complimentary textbooks, 2) Place a box for each publisher in each Department to facilitate collection and return of unwanted copies, 3) Request that prepaid mailing labels be enclosed to facilitate returns, 4) Require the publisher to collect unwanted copies.

Notes: PCC policy (Code of Ethics policy B-303) as required by Oregon state law (ORS Chapter 244) prohibits the sale of complimentary textbooks for personal gain. Any sale of complimentary textbooks which raises cash for the College to pursue college activities must be done in a controlled environment facilitated by either the Business Office or the Bookstore and would require careful advanced planning in order to be lawful.

10. Improve communication between all faculty and staff within each SAC.

This saves costs as communication is crucial to these recommendations being acted upon by PCC faculty and SACs. The better the communication, the more relief may be provided to students who are increasingly hard-pressed by the financial reality of textbook costs.

Strategies for implementation: Advertise well in advance all SAC Meetings and other sponsored events, including times and places, with a reminder communicated by email or otherwise one week before. Consider making use of MyPCC Groups or other online tools for on-going email communication.

Notes: Part time/adjunct instructors may be compensated for attending SAC Meetings and can be encouraged to do so in order to provide maximum input as well as more effective implementation for any SAC decisions made.