

First Place – Sydney Nicole Hollis

Expensive Textbooks: Are There Alternatives?

Affordable college textbooks are necessary for college students, as they rely on them to pass their courses. Many students delay or decide to not purchase required textbooks due to their expensive costs, as many cannot afford to pay these prices. Taking this risk, students' grades have been negatively affected. Publishers are aware of the current situation and offer alternatives such as digital textbooks and subscription style services. These resources are becoming important to students because they offer a cheaper alternative to physical textbooks. Subscription style services would require students to pay a fee to access all of their textbooks, but this fee would be cheaper than other costs a student might encounter. Universities should include subscription style services in college students' tuition fees to ensure all students have access to course materials.

The raging expenses of college textbooks are not new, but prices have drastically risen in recent years. According to a study completed by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, the price of college textbooks has risen by 82 percent between 2002 and 2012 (Shojaian). Between 1997 and 2015, the prices have risen by 1,041 percent (Shojaian). Publishers attempt to disguise that their prices have risen by claiming that newer technologies such as digital textbooks make textbooks more affordable, but they do this to distract from the main problem at hand—the high prices of textbooks. Discussion of the issue is easily avoidable due to the high finances of

college. The conversation instead tends to focus on the expenses of college tuition, allowing the cost of textbooks to seem reasonable. While this may seem reasonable to some, it causes many issues for college students.

Textbook publishers are aware of their market, creating a monopoly for textbooks. Many publishers focus their attention on specific courses rather than all courses. This creates a smaller selection of textbooks for professors, and the demand for these textbooks allows publishers to raise their cost. These higher costs make it difficult for students to afford textbooks. Hannah, a student at a private university in New York City, could not afford to pay for textbooks. Due to this issue, Hannah used a free trial with an e-book subscription service called *Scribd* (Valle). But rather than paying for an extended trial, she took screenshots of all of the material she might need, which is illegal (Valle). The affordability of textbooks influences students' academic behavior. A study conducted by the Florida Virtual Campus found that students reported not purchasing textbooks due to their high cost. This resulted in students taking fewer courses and dropping or withdrawing from a course due to its financial impact (Martin). Delaying or not purchasing course materials has negatively impacted the grades of students (Shojaian). Exigent circumstances call for alternative solutions.

Various solutions for the ongoing issue have been suggested, many with imperfections. Publishers suggest that digital textbooks are more affordable. While this may come across as true, it sets future setbacks. According to Gabby Del Valle, a writer with *Vox Media*, digital textbooks use access codes that expire after the school year, not allowing students to use them as a future reference or to resell their textbooks (Valle). A possible solution to this could be granting permanent access to these resources, although this is unlikely to happen because it

could cause potential problems for publishers. Some professors choose to not assign textbooks and instead use a combination of other sources such as journal articles or other texts, while other professors may use one textbook and will share access with students (Valle). Other attempts have been made to relieve the stress on college students. Roxana Shojaian, a writer with *The Triangle*, claims Virginia has passed legislation mandating that public institutions use educational resources across the state; other states have made an attempt to pass legislation that would reduce the cost of textbooks but have failed.

As can be seen, access codes to textbooks are not ideal. They are expensive and cannot be resold at the end of the semester because the access codes expire. According to the College Board, the average American student spends around \$1,200 on textbooks and course supplies every year (Shojaian). A solution is subscription style services. These services are also digital, but they allow students to have access to various textbooks rather than one. Cengage, an online resource with digital learning and online textbooks, has a subscription service that allows students to access all of their textbooks for a total of \$179.99 a year (Valle). The subscription service is ideal for students, as the service itself is cheaper than most textbooks. With this, these subscription services have various benefits. It gives students access to newer information, as well as informational video and audio clips (Valle). This may be appealing to those that are auditory learners, as it is easy to hear the information rather than reading it. The service also allows for easier access to books. Students have instant access to their textbooks rather than having to wait for them to arrive, and they can also access them anywhere, eliminating the need to haul around numerous textbooks. With their easy accessibility, these services can assist students with physical or mental disabilities. The digital format allows for a lighter load and, according to Stephen

Acker, a contributor to the *ALA TechSource*, is designed to reach all learning styles (Acker).

Subscription style services allow access to various textbooks for a low price, so these services should be included with tuition to guarantee students have materials.

Critics may disagree with subscription style services for a variety of reasons. It may be claimed that not all students have access to online materials. While this may be true, most students use a device to complete their assignments, and other students have access to libraries or computer labs on campus. Critics also mention that students are unable to resell their textbooks because their access codes expire (Valle). This is a true statement, although the benefits from subscription services will outweigh the cost of what the students would make back. Making these services mandatory may send red flags to students and parents, but what this is doing is making these services cheaper. The services become cheaper because it is guaranteed that people will purchase them; according to Valle, “inclusive access helps keep the cost of materials low because there’s a near-guarantee that students will buy the products; it’s kind of like buying in bulk.” While the critics have validated concerns, the positives of the solution outweigh the negatives.

Universities should incorporate subscription style services into their tuition fees to guarantee that students have access to course materials. Expensive textbooks are disrupting students’ education. Many alternatives have been attempted, but the subscription style services are the most promising. Subscription services offer various benefits that will benefit most students. While the solution does have a few imperfections, the positives outweigh the negatives, making this the best solution. To encourage this change, create petitions and send them to universities.

Works Cited

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