

U-Md. system aims to cut textbook costs

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Policy enables search for cheaper copies.

As part of an effort to make college more affordable, higher-education leaders in Maryland are trying to keep textbook prices down.

The Board of Regents of the University System of Maryland unanimously approved guidelines Friday to make it easier for students to search for cheaper books.

"This is a real victory for students," said Josh Michael, a junior at the University of Maryland Baltimore County and a student regent.

When Michael started college, he said, he spent almost \$500 on books for his first four courses. He bought everything his professors suggested, then discovered as the semester went on that he didn't really need extra Spanish workbooks and study guides.

Textbook prices have risen far more quickly than inflation. One reason, according to a U.S. Government Accountability Office study conducted several years ago, is that they often come with lots of extras, such as CDs. Publishers say such features help students learn, but they often go unused.

With tuition frozen at Maryland public universities for the past three years and Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) recommending that the cap be maintained for the next budget year, textbooks have become a target for cost-cutting.

"Textbooks are a huge part of the cost of higher education," said state Sen. James C. Rosapepe (D-Prince George's). "At the University of Maryland, textbooks can cost 10 to 20 percent of the cost of attending classes. At community colleges, prices can be as much as a third of the cost of attending college. You can't have affordable college without lower textbook prices."

That has been Michael's priority. "It's the biggest piece of low-hanging fruit in terms of affordability. It's where we can make immediate, substantive impact."

He and David Nevins, a regent, and P.J. Hogan, a lobbyist for the university system, pushed for a forum at the University of Maryland last fall that featured talks among bookstore owners, publishers, faculty members and students. They discussed the reasons for high textbook prices and devised ways to bring about change.

The resulting 10 guidelines were passed unanimously last week. The regents' policy asks schools to post a number that identifies textbooks required by professors on the college's Web site by a certain deadline each semester. The number allows students to search online for cheaper copies.

"That will help create a competitive marketplace," Nevins said. "Student bookstores will have to be competitively priced, or students will go elsewhere."

The deadline means that not only will students be able to search for bargains, but they can also recoup money by selling their books at the end of each semester. Many campus bookstores will pay half of the retail cost for a used book if they know a professor is planning to require it the next semester. If they don't know whether they can probably sell it, they pay 10 percent.

The regents' policy also asks that faculty members be told the prices of books when they order them. Many said they are unaware of textbook costs and will explore alternatives when confronted with high prices.

Faculty members will be encouraged to use the same editions for several years if the subject matter doesn't change and to choose cheaper books that don't come with unnecessary features.

The guidelines also encourage schools to place textbooks in libraries, create rental programs and fund financial aid for course materials.

Some see the guidelines as a first step.

"It's great that the regents adopted the policy," Rosapepe said, "but the policy is mostly a set of 'shoulds' and very few 'shalls.' It's an expression of intent that is generally positive, but the extent to which it'll bring about real change is not clear."

The General Assembly is also considering bills on textbook pricing. Recent federal legislation mandated that publishers provide faculty with more information about prices.

Nevins said that students will keep pressuring schools to comply with Maryland's new policy.

The issue is so important to students that U-Md. has held forums about the campus bookstore's next contract. Officials are preparing to choose the company that will run the store for the next five years. Jim Osteen, assistant vice president for student affairs, said that textbook affordability will be important as the school evaluates vendors.

U-Md., Towson University and other Maryland schools have begun making changes voluntarily, such as posting searchable book numbers online.

That process just started at UMBC, where Michael is majoring in political science and higher education. He said he found half of his books online for lower prices and bought half at the campus bookstore for a few dollars more and greater convenience. He said he saved about \$70.

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