



CM BULLETIN

Textbook Rentals Could Be a Private Affair 1/20/06

Everybody seems to be questioning textbook affordability. Since the Public Interest Research Groups (PIRG) kicked off a firestorm two years ago with its first Ripoff 101 report, lawmakers from Capitol Hill to those in just about every state are examining ways make textbooks more affordable for students.

Last week, [Virginia's State Council on Higher Education](#) made national news when it released the findings of a statewide textbook study that has sparked interest from other states. The study was mandated by a law the Virginia General Assembly passed last year to seek ways to rein in mounting higher education costs.

Also last week, Tom Bauer received no media attention when he gave a report on textbook affordability to the San Mateo County Community College District (SMCCCD) Board of Trustees. But that doesn't appear to bother the director of the SMCCCD's three stores.

What Bauer did receive was an endorsement from the SMCCCD board for the "nontraditional" method being used to seek money to expand the district's three-semester-old textbook rental program.

Soliciting private donations to help fund a full textbook rental program is one of several things Bauer and the store managers are doing to make textbooks more affordable for students in that California community college district. Obtaining more private donations for the rental program would eliminate the startup risk for the bookstores, and the plan could become a national model for textbook rental programs. There are about 50 textbook rental programs in the country.

"The beauty of this is that someone else funds the program initially, and our stores don't have to start in the red as we help students afford the textbooks they need for classes," Bauer said. "It's amazing what people in the community are willing to do to help out when they are simply asked, and they can see a tangible outcome."

Currently, the program is limited to textbooks for early childhood education (ECE) classes at Skyline College, San Bruno, and Canada College, Redwood City. Bauer said \$250,000 is needed to start a full textbook rental program at each of the three SMCCCD college bookstores, which also include the one at the College of San Mateo. That would ensure some copies of every title for every class would be available for rent, he said. Bauer said plans are underway to expand the rental program to other subjects by next fall.

Bauer was asked by the SMCCCD board to make a general presentation

about the state of textbook affordability in the district. "We figured this was an opportunity to hit them with everything we got, and try to get their support to really move our rental plan forward."

In a nearly two-hour presentation on Jan. 11, Bauer gave the board what it asked for, and then outlined the funding plan for the textbook rental program. He also solicited the board for additional capital to establish a textbook fund that would be earmarked only for an expanded rental program at all three colleges. The board members promised to seriously consider establishing such a fund. In the meantime, the board helped Bauer get scheduled to make a similar presentation to the SMCCCD Foundation, the district's formal fundraising arm, in February. Bauer is hoping the SMCCCD Foundation also will want to make targeted solicitations for the rental program.

"I will ask anyone at any time for a donation to help our students afford their books," Bauer said. "This is about what's right." Many students are in families who make too much to qualify for financial aid or grants, but in reality don't make enough to afford the books and supplies needed, Canada Financial Aid Director Margie Carrington told the *San Mateo Daily Journal*.

Currently the textbook rental program assists about 1,700 students at Canada and Skyline colleges. Students have the choice to obtain a book one of three ways—purchase it at full retail, buy it used, or rent it for about two-thirds less than the full price. There are 35 titles for rent, and the rented books have to be returned at the end of a semester in good condition. No writing and highlighting in the books is allowed.

Of the classes that offered book rentals last fall, 95% percent of the students enrolled chose to rent, according to Jai Kumar, bookstore manager at Canada College. If the students had purchased the textbooks instead of renting, they would have spent more than \$106,373. By renting the books, the students collectively spent \$26,593, a saving of \$79,780.

For an academic department to become active in the rental program, it must commit to using the same books for a minimum of two years. Once identified, the books are purchased with either grant money or private donations.

The Early Childhood Education Department provides rentals mostly with grant money from tobacco tax collections that are funneled through the state's First Five program that is dedicated to recruiting and retaining quality teachers. The department also receives disbursements from other grants and scholarship sources, including the Canada President's Textbook Scholarship Fund (CPTSF), which is supported by the fundraising efforts of community leaders.

Until the textbook rental program was started with a \$120,000 investment, the ECE department spent its grant money to purchase and give away textbooks to every student. To extend the life of the funds, the textbook rental program was developed. ECE Professor Dianne Eyer told the *San Mateo Daily Journal* that the rental program forced the faculty to

talk more to bookstore staff and among themselves to plan classes to ensure the books chosen would work for at least two years. Eyer admitted that at first professors didn't realize some students weren't buying the required books because of the cost.

Last year the CPTSF, which serves individual needy students through the school's financial aid office, raised \$52,000. Of that amount, \$25,000 was from a single donor. Bauer said when he saw that donation, "That's when it all clicked for me. Why not seek donations so that students in all courses have the same access to book rentals?"

Starting a rental program with donations also means that a bookstore can maintain its margin with every rental. If a store fronts the capital to start a rental program, it would take at least four semesters before the store would realize the margin dollars.

The SMCCCD stores have gotten support for their rental plan and other cost-saving efforts from colleagues at 16 other bookstores in the California Bay Area. Many in the group, which call themselves The Bay 10, hope to also start rental programs on their campuses. The Bay 10 colleges also have come together as sort of a buying group to identify textbook titles that each campus would use, and the group is now are seeking a publisher willing to create a custom edition order for thousands of copies.

In addition to textbook rental program, the SMCCCD bookstores have many other different ways to help combat the escalating costs of textbooks. The programs include working with the other Bay Area college bookstores, working with faculty to create the most cost-effective bundles, and working with publisher representatives to find alternate versions of textbooks that are less expensive.

Last July, the California Public Interest Research Group (CALPIRG) introduced a report and guide for college stores that want to start textbook rental programs. The report is called *Affordable Textbooks for the 21st Century: A Guide to Establishing Textbook Rental Services*. In the report is a 12-step guide to help stores figure out the best model for their campus.

The 12 steps to creating a textbook rental program:

- Create a textbook rental service advisory committee.
- Establish textbook rental mission.
- Establish operating guidelines.
- Update contracts.
- Establish faculty textbook adoption guidelines.
- Determine rental fees and startup costs.
- Determine storage requirements.

- Purchase and build textbook inventory.
- Develop computer tracking system/communication with campus.
- Determine store layout/storage and staffing.
- Teach students and faculty how to use textbook rental service.
- Continue to explore new solutions to the high cost of textbooks.

To view Bauer's entire presentation to the SMCCCD Board of Trustees, go to www.nacs.org/news/caltextbook.ppt.

—Yalinda Moore

Related Links:

CALPIRG report on textbook rentals

www.calpirg.org/CA.asp?id2=18113&id3=CA&

NACS FAQ On Textbook Rental Programs

www.nacs.org/common/research/faq_rentals.pdf

"Textbook Rental: A Case Study"

(The College Store, July/August 2004)

www.nacs.org/members/secure/cs_archive/040708_textrental.asp