

## [Easing textbook sticker shock](#)

### [Book loan programs open new chapter in helping college students on a budget](#)

- [Christopher Heredia, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

Friday, November 4, 2005



Two San Mateo County community colleges have launched textbook rental programs to counterbalance soaring textbook prices, the bane of many students who are struggling to pay rising education costs.

It's just one of several tactics Bay Area students and college campuses are taking to save students money.

"If we can remove one more barrier to students attending college, hopefully we can help them succeed and it will help the community at large," said Jai Kumar, bookstore manager at Cañada College in Redwood City, which this fall began offering rental textbooks, along with sister campus Skyline College in San Bruno.

Cañada and Skyline's program are two of fewer than two dozen such rental programs in the country. Some schools, such as City College of San Francisco, have free student-run book loan programs, while others offer programs for students to sell or exchange their books.

The various programs are in response to textbook costs that have escalated at a pace that exceeds inflation. A Government Accountability Office report in July said textbook prices have risen 186 percent in the past 20 years, twice the rate of inflation. The report also said the average student pays \$900 per academic year for books. It cited publishers' practice of bundling materials with textbooks, such as CD-ROMs and other supplements, as the culprit for the cost increase. The supplemental material, critics claim, is of little use to students.

Students at Bay Area college campuses have taken matters into their own hands in other ways. Some buy cheaper international editions of books online, share books with friends or, in some cases, photocopy books, despite the fact that this is a blatant violation of copyright laws.

"When I found out that all my books this semester were going to be over \$100 each, I was ready to faint," said Kelly Liu, a 20-year-old UC Berkeley student. "I'm only going to use them for six months. I can't sell them back and get my \$500 back. It makes me wonder about my investment."

Liu, a third-year business major at UC Berkeley, has heard of classmates photocopying entire books for their courses then returning them for a full refund. It costs about \$20 to photocopy a textbook, she said. Her classmates also buy their textbooks online at lower cost than at the

college bookstore.

Liu's bill for textbooks this semester would have been \$500 had she not resorted to other means, including buying international editions over the Internet at half the cost she would have paid purchasing the American version.

At Cañada College, the program is limited to textbooks for early childhood development classes, although college officials hope to expand the program before spring semester. Cañada College student Traci Siri, 41, of San Mateo, said she welcomed the chance to rent her textbook for the early childhood education course she is taking this fall. The new book sells for \$75; Siri paid one-third that using the textbook-rental program. Siri, who is studying to become a teacher, said without the rental program her textbook expenses could reach \$400 per semester.

Kumar, along with a committee of faculty members and San Mateo County Community College District administrators, developed the textbook-rental program, which began as a pilot last summer with 400 books rented. This fall, 1,800 students at both schools have rented books.

"The rental program is great because it's saving me a lot of money," Siri said. "Teaching isn't a field that pays all that well, so this helps subsidize the cost of going to school. To save even \$50 per book is a great deal to a student, especially if you're taking a full load."

Siri said the rental program is popular with her classmates. "We're getting the same exact book, the same information as somebody who bought the book new," she said.

Unlike students who own their books, borrowers can't write in or highlight passages in a rented book. Rental books are due back at the end of final exams.

"I write down what I would normally highlight," Siri said. "I think it helps me retain the information better anyway."

Laura Deehan, assistant organizing director for the California Public Interest Research Group, which is coordinating a campaign to pressure publishers to reduce textbook costs, praised the San Mateo County Community College District textbook rental program.

"Whatever colleges can do to make it more accessible for students to read the text, we're in support of," Deehan said.

CalPIRG, located in Sacramento, has student chapters at colleges in 15 states including UC Berkeley and seven other UC campuses. The group's Web site suggests university and college campus institute textbook rental programs as a way of reducing student expenses. CalPIRG also recommends that students start book-swap groups and recommends that faculty members negotiate discounts with publishers and also allow students to use older editions of textbooks.

A publishing industry official said textbook rental programs are one of many ways colleges can defray rising college costs. Other tools schools have for cutting back include offering used copies and older editions. Professors can also select pertinent chapters and have them photocopied and made available at a cheaper cost.

"Publishers have no objection to colleges starting textbook-rental programs," said Bruce Hildebrand, executive director for higher education at the Association of American Publishers.

Hildebrand defended the rising cost of textbooks, which he said is a result of college instructors insisting that their students have the most up-to-date information and extra materials, such as CD-ROMs and workbooks.

Hildebrand said that there are about 20 book-rental programs in the country, including those at Cañada, Skyline and Cal State Fullerton.

"The whole issue is what do the students need?" Hildebrand said. "Will a low-cost, black-and-white abbreviated edition suit their needs? If so, then that's what they should get. ... You can't compare a black-and-white photocopy to a color textbook with interactive materials and the latest in technological advancements. It'd be like comparing a Model T to the most recent Corvette."

Starting a textbook-rental program can be cost-prohibitive for some colleges and university bookstores, which have suffered financially in the face of competition from online book sellers and large chains such as Barnes and Noble.

At Sonoma State University, bookstore director Ken Brown said he and the president of the associated students are looking into establishing a textbook-rental program in the spring. Brown is also on a campaign to save students money by encouraging instructors to order books as soon as the semester ends so that students who sell their used books can get a better price.

Under the current system, if a faculty member hasn't placed an order shortly after the semester ends, then Brown has to order new books or books from a used-book supplier. In that scenario, students who try to sell their used copies back to the bookstore get only the wholesale price, which ranges from 3 to 30 percent of the original cost.

"It was my idea to set it up," Brown said. "I did it to offset the unhappiness students felt when we offered them wholesale price at book buyback. Some of them said, 'Five percent? To hell with you guys.' I understand them. I was a student a while back."

Another way Brown tackled the problem was to start a textbook-exchange Web site, where students can sell their books to other students. The Web site has been operating for five years. This fall students put up 130 books for sale.

Skyline and Cañada colleges were able to pay the initial cost of the textbook rental program using First 5 grant money, from the state of California. College officials hope to expand the program in the spring and are looking for private donors to help with the program.

Don Newton, general manager of the bookstore at City College of San Francisco, said the solution to the problem is complex. One of the solutions that City College has tried is a free book loan program, run by students. The college bookstore pays the program costs to the tune about \$30,000 per semester to purchase the books.

"Textbooks are expensive and editions keep changing, so it costs a lot of money to run a

worthwhile program," Newton said.

"The reasons we started the book loan program are that we have a huge population of students, some of whom are homeless, and many others are in great financial need," said Lauren Nelson, the college's book loan program coordinator. "We wanted to provide a service that would help our students."

Students who qualify for financial aid or who have fee waivers get first dibs on borrowed books. After the first week of school, the remaining books are available to all students. About 1,600 students have used the book-loan program this fall.

The reason Newton hasn't started a rental program at City College is cost: "You need space to store the rental copies," he said. "It's also a big job."

The Associated Students, Newton said, took it upon themselves to use space in the student union to operate the book loan program. Newton said without support from a private donor to pay for a book rental program and expand the already cramped bookstore, it would not be feasible for the college to operate a textbook rental program.

Tom Bauer, director of the San Mateo Community College District bookstores, said officials are now looking for private donors to sustain the program and expand it to other disciplines beyond early-childhood education.

Cañada early childhood education Professor Dianne Eyer, who wrote the grant for First 5 funding for the textbook rental program, said her department's faculty have been supportive of the textbook rental program. She hopes other departments at the college will respond to the rental program with equal enthusiasm.

"We've had an amazing partnership with the bookstore and faculty," said Eyer, coordinator for the college's early-childhood education and child development programs. "That's what it takes. Neither the bookstore nor the professors can do it on their own."

---

## On the Web

-- The California Public Interest Research Group's affordable textbook campaign, [www.maketextbooksaffordable.com](http://www.maketextbooksaffordable.com)

-- "College Textbooks: Enhanced Offerings Appear to Drive Recent Price Increases" report by Government Accountability Office, [www.gao.gov/docsearch/abstract.php?rptno=GAO-05-806](http://www.gao.gov/docsearch/abstract.php?rptno=GAO-05-806)

-- "What Every Student Should Know About College Textbooks" the Association of American Publisher's response to the Government Accountability Office report, [www.publishers.org/](http://www.publishers.org/)

*E-mail Christopher Heredia at [cheredia@sfchronicle.com](mailto:cheredia@sfchronicle.com)*

Page F - 1

URL: <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2005/11/04/PNGKGFSGSLO1.DTL>

---

[©2006 San Francisco Chronicle](#)