

## Campus unrest over costly texts

### Factors include unwitting teachers and ever-newer editions. Some option: Free Web offerings and congressional action.

By Kathy Boccella

INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Regina Ferry was shocked at the price of the textbook for her history of medieval Japan course at Pennsylvania State University this semester. It was free.

"Usually a history book can cost up to \$100," said the 21-year-old Japanese major from Broomall. "The book for my astronomy class cost \$130."

Ferry lucked out by taking a class with Gregory Smits, a professor of East Asian studies who writes his own online texts that students - or anyone else, for that matter - can use at no charge.

"I'm amazed by how much commercial textbooks cost," said Smits, who has written six online books, complete with graphs, pictures and links, on East Asia.

Smits is part of a growing revolt against the heart-stopping price of college books, which cost students an average of \$900 a year after rising 186 percent from 1986 to 2004, according to a 2006 U.S. Department of Education report.

Bundling books with supplemental materials, such as CDs and online tests, is driving up the prices, publishers say. But that doesn't mean cheaper options aren't available.

If professors "want a \$20 book, we'll ship the \$20 book as quickly as we'll ship the \$100 book," said Bruce Hildebrand, a spokesman for the Association of American Publishers.

Now advocates are trying to transform the \$5-billion-a-year industry by encouraging free online educational materials, and last week the U.S. House passed legislation aimed at curbing costs.

"There are a lot of contributing costs that make higher education expensive, and textbooks are a significant one," said Nicole Allen, a spokeswoman with the [maketextbooksaffordable.org](http://maketextbooksaffordable.org) campaign of the Student Public Interest Research Group.

Text prices rose an average of 6 percent a year from 1986 to 2004, twice the rate of inflation, and the same book costs more in the United States than in other countries, the federal report also said.

Publishers aren't getting all the profits. According to the National Association of College Stores, publishers get 64.3 percent, bookstores 22.4 percent, authors 11.6 percent, and shippers 1.7 percent for each dollar spent on a new textbook. The proportions have not changed over the years.

Also jacking up the price are frequent new editions, which often come out annually, according to a Government Accountability Office study.

Why are new versions needed in subjects such as calculus, "where there hasn't been a major breakthrough in 250 years?" Allen asked.

Professors share some of the blame because they don't make price a primary consideration when choosing what students must buy, she added. Faculty also can have a personal interest since sometimes they wrote the books they ask students to buy.

But often professors don't know the cost of the books they order because publishers do not include the prices on brochures or complimentary copies, Allen and others said.

It's a frequent criticism addressed in legislation, passed Thursday by the House, that would require publishers to provide faculty with more information about pricing, explain revisions made to new editions, and sell textbooks and supplemental materials separately.

House Resolution 4137, which now goes to a conference committee (the Senate had passed a similar bill), also calls for universities to tell students which books are needed before the start of classes so they have time to shop around for better deals. Five states have

adopted similar changes.

The publishers association said it had nothing to hide.

"I really don't know how we can make it more transparent," Hildebrand said.

Publishers can provide only wholesale prices because bookstores set the retail prices, he said. And anybody can find textbook prices on the Internet by typing in the International Standard Book Number in a search box.

"This information is available," Hildebrand said. "It takes two-tenths of a second to get it. I don't think that's an undue burden."

Charles M. Grinstead, a Swarthmore College math professor who cowrote a free online text on probability theory (also available in print), said that he always checked prices "because I'm outraged by them," but that it required some digging.

Textbooks, Hildebrand maintained, require enormous "intellectual input" from authors, editors and designers, which add to the cost. And under pressure to keep up with the latest in technology, publishers are bundling more online and interactive materials with books.

"That's incorporated into the price," Hildebrand said.

Advocates maintain those extras should be priced separately.

Some books include one-semester passes to online supplements. So when students go to sell the books back to the store or another student, the extras are worthless, Allen said.

Students also have a hard time reselling books when a new edition makes theirs obsolete. Ferry said the Penn State bookstore had offered her \$1 when she tried to sell back her pricey astronomy book because the professor had ordered the new edition.

Students who don't want to use the campus bookstore have a slew of other options, including Web sites that rent books, such as [Chegg.com](#), or [CampusBooks.com](#), which finds the best deal through comparison shopping.

Still, nothing beats having a professor supply the book for free. Another of Smits' students, Steve LaRosa, 22, said he couldn't afford to buy all his books last semester.

But getting more professors to forgo print for e-texts may be a challenge. Textbookrevolution.org lists free educational materials but has a limited supply and does not know how many professors are using it.

"You have to get the professor to assign the [online] book," acknowledged Jason Turgeon, who started the site as a student at Northeastern University three years ago.

Jean-Claude Bradley, a chemistry professor at Drexel University, incorporates a lot of free materials into his organic-chemistry class but also requires a \$140 text because the course is three semesters and taught by two other teachers.

Switching from print to online takes a lot of effort, especially if a program has been designed around a book, Bradley conceded. And some faculty think free materials aren't as good or varied enough to meet their needs.

Not Smits. He prefers his own books because they are tailored to his lectures. But when he was unexpectedly assigned a new course last semester, he decided to assign a commercial text . . . until he saw the \$55 tab.


"I didn't even realize they could be that expensive," Smits said. "I sent a message to the class saying don't buy it, and I wrote one as we went along."

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