

Addressing Students' Financial Constraints in my Teaching and Advising

Introduction

This teaching tip was prompted by a question from the Ohio State University Center for Teaching Excellence: "*We are curious about how your teaching is affected by your understanding of the financial realities of your students.*" After some reflection, I offer these thoughts based on 35 years in the classroom.

Teaching

I was a regular in my campus bookstore each quarter, often to see if textbooks I required were in stock. But I was insulated from the recent prices of new and used textbooks by complimentary desk copies for adopting a text or examination copies for considering a publisher's textbooks. Then I had my eyes opened when I did a professional teaching enrichment leave at the State University about 40 miles from my home. I had to pay for the required books and other materials. So it was a powerful reminder that in the face of expensive textbooks, there are multiple strategies to lower textbook costs. Recently academic books may be purchased as E-books or textbook rentals. The advantage of rental compared to buy (preferably used) and sell back at the end of the semester is the sell back value can be zero if the teacher orders a different text or if the publisher brings out a new edition. In my own teaching to replace commercial lab manuals, I prepared four manuals or study guides that were produced in the campus copy center and sold in the bookstore. I also did not change texts frequently, and I would provide an old syllabus with lecture topics identified with pages from the previous edition of the text. This made the most recent past edition of required texts of value if students had a classmate or friend willing to lend or sell it. Finally, if I had two copies of a required textbook, I placed one on closed reserve in the campus library for student use. This provides access to textbook assignments for students without funds to buy/rent one.

In the courses I taught I usually required a suitable text and put assigned pages for each lecture on the syllabus. I suggested on the first day that they make a friend or two that first class and buy the book in partnership with them. If one of the partners has already purchased the book, no problem, sell shares to the new partners. Even if three people share a textbook, there will be many hours each week that it sits cover closed on a partner's bookshelf. The predictable difficulty will be who gets the book the day or night before a test. This dilemma illustrates a weakness of partnership form of business organization when equal ownership results in deadlock if the partners cannot agree on a sharing scheme. This is a good life lesson in any course. The last bit of advice was to sell your book back to the campus bookstore, but only if you won't need it for later coursework or on your professional bookshelf. My campus store offered one half of the book's new price at buyback if required next term. Faculty should report the renewed adoption of textbooks early to maximize buyback value for their students.

Advising

In my advising duties I tried to ascertain if the student was working part or full time. If so, they needed to see that they could not take the same load of course credits as a schoolmate receiving family aid or scholarships and devoting all their time and energy to school work. Occasionally mature and well-organized students can work and maintain a full academic schedule, but they are exceptional managers of their time. I told new students and their parents that the bookstore typically ordered a modest number of used textbooks and early purchase of a good used copy would save 25% in the campus bookstore and more if working through web-based book sites such as Amazon.com.

The last pro-student action in every class was to suggest that they put their name, address, phone, and e-mail address in their books as soon as it was firmly established they were staying in my course. So often, I would observe expensive textbooks left without their owners' identifying information upon entering or leaving a classroom. Like unbranded livestock, no owner ID makes an easier decision for the unscrupulous finder to keep the book or to sell it.

Submitted by:

David Munn

Emeritus
Ohio State ATI
Wooster, OH
Munn.1@osu.edu