



OFFICE OF THE STATE COMPTROLLER

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Textbook Pricing Disparities

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Introduction

Over 427,400 students attend the 64 college campuses of the State University of New York (SUNY) across the State each year. Another 400,000 attend the 23 colleges of the City University of New York (CUNY). These public institutions represent not only some of the best schools in the State, but across the nation. However, the rising cost of tuition and related expenses for many two-year and four-year degrees is putting college out of reach for many students or burdening them and their families with years of debt payments. One of the areas where prices have risen rapidly is college textbooks. A typical undergraduate can expect to pay from \$400 - \$800 per semester on required textbooks, or about \$4,000 over the course of a four-year degree program for a combination of new and used books. For the poor and working-class New York State families who devote up to 37 percent of their income to pay for college costs, high textbook prices present a substantial barrier to college access.¹

This report illustrates that schools can help to alleviate the cost burden of textbook price inflation on their students. If all higher education institutions, including SUNY and CUNY, would provide information on required textbooks to students on a timelier basis, including the International Standard Book Number (ISBN), students would have the opportunity to compare prices across a number of different sources and save money. Using the Internet and other bookstores outside of the on-campus college bookstore, a student could save as much as \$2,000 over a four-year period.

Textbook Price Inflation

According to the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), costs for textbooks increased 186 percent between December 1986 and December 2004, for an average annual increase of 6 percent, or twice the rate of inflation.²

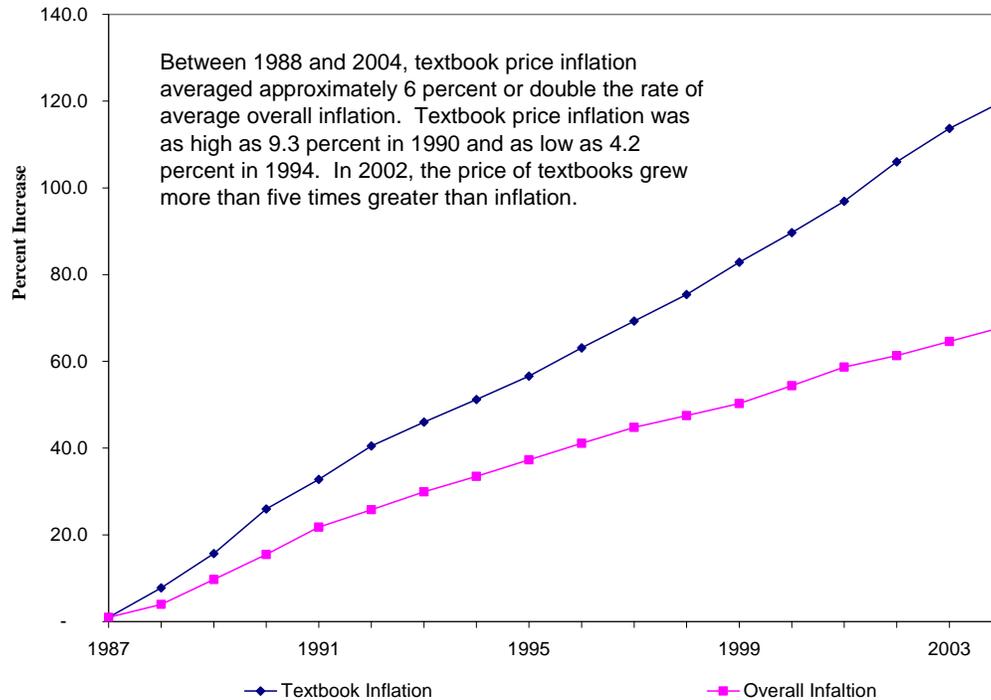
The growth in the price of textbooks is due to a number of different factors, including the bundling of extra items with textbooks, frequent edition changes and a lack of transparency in the manner textbooks are marketed to faculty. According to the New York Public Interest

¹ National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. *Measuring Up 2008. The New York State Report Card on Higher Education*. December 2008.

² Government Accountability Office. *College Textbooks: Enhanced Offerings Appear to Drive Recent Price Increases*. July 2005.

Research Group, the first two factors often are unnecessary for the class being taught and, therefore, add unnecessary costs.³ The latter factor demonstrates how publishers need to make it easier for faculty to make book choices that will allow their students to save money.

Average Annual Percent Increase of Textbook Price Inflation Compared with Overall Inflation



Note: Represents cumulative cost increase of textbooks as compared to the cumulative increase in overall costs.
 Source: United States Government Accountability Office

A number of different solutions could address the textbook pricing problem. In 2008, 27 states have introduced legislation to address various facets of the issue, including better and timelier information for students, exempting college textbooks from sales tax and the requirement that bundled goods must be sold separately. In New York, Governor Paterson recently signed the Textbook Access Act, which, when requested by faculty, requires better pricing information from publishers, as well as tightened substitution policies when certain books are not available.⁴ At the federal level, additional price and other textbook disclosure provisions take effect July 1, 2010.⁵ Given the increasing price of textbooks and tuition, it is important for students and parents to have the information necessary to efficiently shop for both.

³ New York Public Interest Research Group. *Sticker Shock 101: Faculty Opinions About Textbook Prices, Publishers' Tactics, and Efforts to Rein in Textbook Prices*. April 2008.

⁴ Chapter 433 of the Laws of 2008.

⁵ Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008, Public Law 110-315 (2008).

Conclusions and Recommendations

With so many students and families struggling to make ends meet, SUNY and CUNY have opportunities to improve efforts to provide students the ability to comparison shop for textbooks. The Office of the State Comptroller recommends that SUNY and CUNY undertake the following actions to help ease the textbook cost burden on students and families:

- Colleges should post a full course listing with required textbooks on their websites at least six weeks prior to the start of classes to allow students time to comparison shop for the best textbook prices.
- Posted textbook lists should include the specific ISBN of each textbook, along with the title, author, edition and publisher, and the campus bookstore price for the book.
- If other textbook editions or printings would be acceptable alternatives to the required textbook version, the ISBNs and other identifying information should be listed for these versions, as well.
- Textbook edition changes should be limited to instances where significant updates in content occur. This would enable students to purchase used books, which often come at a large discount compared to the price of new books.
- Colleges should broaden their efforts to encourage faculty members to get their textbook orders in early so that bookstores have more time to secure used copies of their books.

Tips for Students

- **Comparison shop to find the best available price on textbooks.** Local bookstores may offer textbooks at a discount relative to the campus bookstore price. Online comparison shopping sites also provide an opportunity to find competitively priced textbooks. When shopping online, make sure to order at least two to four weeks before the start of classes to ensure timely delivery.
- **Purchase used books whenever possible.** These are often significantly less expensive than the new version. Used books can be found at the campus bookstore, local bookstores, online and through student networks.
- **Talk to the professor to see if other editions or printings of the required textbook are acceptable.** For example, older editions of the textbook may be acceptable if significant updates have not occurred.
- **Consider purchasing eBooks instead of the printed version, if available.** These electronic versions are less expensive than the printed versions and help to conserve resources. eBooks can be downloaded online to a personal computer or eBook reading device.

- **Consider renting instead of purchasing textbooks.** Rented textbooks can cost a fraction of the purchase price of new textbooks and are available through various sites on the Internet.

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