

A Potential Solution for Textbook Affordability

Ashwin Satyanarayana, Tatiana Malyuta and Hong Li

*N-913, Computer Systems Technology,
New York City College of Technology (CUNY), 300 Jay St, Brooklyn, NY 11201.*

Abstract

The cost of college textbooks has skyrocketed in recent years. To students and families already struggling to afford high tuition and fees, an additional \$1,200 per year on books and supplies can be the breaking point. That's as much as 39% of tuition and fees at a community college and 14% of tuition and fees at a four-year public institution.

During the fall of 2013, the Student PIRGs conducted a two-part study to investigate the effect of high textbook costs on students and higher education, as well as to evaluate student interest in alternatives to the traditional textbook. The study consisted of a survey of 2,039 students from more than 150 different university campuses across the country. There were two main findings:

- High textbook costs continue to deter students from purchasing their assigned materials – despite concern for their own grades. In this survey, 65% of all respondents said that they had decided against buying a textbook because it was too expensive.
- High textbook costs have ripple effects on other academic decisions. Nearly half of all students surveyed said that the cost of textbooks impacted how many/which classes they took each semester.

The underlying cause for high prices comes from a fundamental market flaw in the publishing industry. The professor chooses the book, but the student is forced to pay the price. Because of this, the student is, in essence, a captive market. Without the ability of the student to choose a more affordable option, publishers are able to drive prices higher without fear of repercussion. It is also important to note that just five textbook companies control more than 80% of the \$8.8 billion publishing market, giving them near market monopoly with protection from competition.

At the Computer Systems Technology department at New York City College of Technology (CUNY), we have successfully implemented a pilot program to alleviate the cost by self-publishing a high quality, peer reviewed textbook for our database course. These textbooks are more affordable and have the potential to save students \$100 on average, per course, per semester. Through this process, self-published textbooks give purchasing power back to the student, removing the market failure that allows high prices for traditional textbooks, while also protecting the right of faculty to create and assign the textbook they feel most appropriate. We used CreateSpace (an amazon company) to publish our textbook with the cost of around \$13 for each textbook (around 300 pages). Self-publishing with peer review and validation (similar to the one used in journals) addresses the ethical (i.e. authenticity of the material) as well as quality of the textbook. It also allows teachers to keep ownership of their work and make changes when necessary. In two semesters of our trial study, we found that 100% of our students purchased the textbook. In conclusion, we feel that self-publishing high quality textbooks have the potential to change education for the better and we plan to continue using them in our classrooms in the semesters ahead.