

SMC ETHICS

Continuing a Dialogue on What We Do and How We Do It

Textbook Buyers

Dear Professor,

I am buying books from faculty. I pay in cash and buy all types of textbooks including instructor's editions and exam copies. I now have a new scanner and I can meet you off campus or scan personal libraries at your home – private & confidential.

Regards,
your Book Buyer.

As faculty, publishers commonly mail us unwanted textbooks hoping we adopt said textbook for the next semester. Some feel this constant stream of unsolicited textbooks and book buyers willing to buy them is a “perk” of being a professor. But is this practice ethical?

While the result could be cheaper books for students when book buyers resell them on Amazon, it could also result in more expensive books when publisher's prices go up to offset the costs of so many “free” editions sold to book buyers. With instructor's editions up for sale, standards are eroded as test questions and exam keys therein become common knowledge to students.



Textbook Adoption and Open Education Resources

One of the foremost ways that faculty members exercise academic freedom is through the textbooks and materials used in the classroom. This is, of course, necessary for us to be good instructors; we need to know and feel comfortable with the information we using to support our class, but there is another consideration that should inform our decision-making: our students.

According to the USPIRG (Public Interest Research Group), 65% of students they surveyed had not purchased a textbook because it was too expensive. The same report showed that the minimum wage has risen 300% since 1980 while textbook prices have risen 800%. As textbook publication is tightly controlled by a small group of publishers, this rise in cost is nearly unavoidable. Moreover, specific departments, like math and sciences, are more affected by this than others. So how, as a campus, should we respond to this issue?

As instructors, we have a number of options. We will see an increased focus on OER (Open Education Resources) in the coming months on campus. These resources often allow us to continue teaching exactly as we have, but with a lower cost to our students. We also have the option of placing books on reserve in the library or allowing students to use older editions of books when possible. And to accompany these options, we

Perhaps a more palatable way of disposing of unwanted books would be to find ways to directly benefit our students such as placing them on reserve in the library or building reference libraries in various student centers. Of course you can always hand back your unused editions to the publisher's reps that frequent our hallways just as the Book Buyers do.

Keep Responding!

Here at PERC HQ, we have enjoyed receiving all of your responses, both in email form as well as to our various polls. We hope to increase our avenues for interaction and participation in the 2016-17 academic year, so please keep responding! The link below (active in the downloadable PDF file) will show the results of our Rate My Professors poll that many of you responded to. Thanks to all of you, and we'll see you in the fall!

[RMP Results](#)

should be asking ourselves if every textbook we ask our students to buy is necessary to the course; are we *using* them, or are they just a convenience for us?

There are, of course, differing opinions on this problem. Some instructors are less understanding of students' "inability" to afford the textbooks for the classes they themselves registered for, particularly when the same students bring laptops or iPhones to class. This is a reasonable complaint, and one worth considering from an ethical perspective. For example, are we viewing that technology in 2016 as extraneous? It is easy sometimes to view these devices as distractions or luxury items, but if we consider the lives of our students outside of the classroom, we may be able to understand the financial distinction our students are making. According to the same USPIRG study, of the students who did not purchase textbooks, 90% knew that it hurt their ability to succeed in the class (and cared about this fact), but still made the decision to risk not purchasing the book.

As instructors and academics, it is understandable that we might feel a bit aggrieved that students in our classes place financial priority elsewhere when it comes to purchasing textbooks. But perhaps, as a community college, our focus should be on equity and giving our students as few hurdles to success as possible. As mentioned above, many departments and instructors have fewer options in this area due to the nature of the required materials. Some of these departments have pushed efforts as far as possible already and still face resistance or student inability to purchase more expensive textbooks. Of course, this problem is not solved through a single course, but rather the overall balance. As we look forward to the 2016-17 academic year with a focus on equity and an ever-increasing array of web-based and open-source options, perhaps it is time to ask what the role of textbook selection should be in campus-wide efforts.

CONTACT US!

If you have any ideas or issues you would like to submit to the Professional Ethics and Responsibilities Committee for future consideration, get in touch with us through the links below.

[PERC website](#)

[email](#)