

A digital solution to text book costs

For a while now, the cost of college textbooks has continued to skyrocket. This summer, on the AFT Higher Education program and policy council's recommendation, the AFT executive council passed a resolution in support of textbook affordability. The resolution encourages higher education locals to start talking internally about ways members can offer alternatives to current textbook supply and pricing systems and can support legislation to address the rising costs.

According to a new report by the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, the policy fixes that state legislators and university officials have proposed will not effectively counteract the prohibitive pricing trends.

The committee, an independent federal panel that advises Congress, blames the rapid price increases on a "structural imperfection," and has called for a "market driven by supply rather than demand." The committee has proposed the creation of a "national digital marketplace," in which professors and students could buy books and materials from a designated Web site while protecting publishers' and authors' copyrights. Reps. Howard "Buck" McKeon (R-Calif.) and David Wu (D-Ore.) commissioned the yearlong study in May 2006. The committee then held hearings on three college campuses in California, Illinois and Oregon. The committee's report, "Turn the Page: Making College Textbooks More Affordable," emphasizes the need to make textbooks more affordable especially for low- and moderate-income students, for whom the cost of textbooks has become particularly burdensome. Short-term approaches—like textbook rental programs and financial aid that covers textbooks for students who can't afford them—partly address such rising costs. But they simply won't have enough of a lasting impact. According to the report, turning "a supply-driven, producer-centric market ... into a demand-driven, college- and student-centric market" will alleviate the problem.

California State University has already begun to create a digital resource, which the committee describes as "groundbreaking." The report goes on to say that "when fully developed, CSU's statewide solution can be the first step toward a national digital marketplace for voluntary use by other states, colleges, faculty, and students."

The entire report can be read at www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/acsf/edlite-txtbkstudy.html.

Rising college costs are pinching opportunity

A college education is more important than ever to Americans, but a record number of them fear they can't afford it, according to a national survey on college quality, affordability and access.

The survey, released in May and conducted by Public Agenda and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, found widespread concern that the rising cost of tuition may prevent qualified students from attending college. While a record number of Americans (50 percent) see college as crucial for success in the workplace, compared with 31 percent in 2000, more than half of Americans (58 percent) say that college costs are rising faster than other expenses. And 62 percent agree that many qualified and motivated students do not have the opportunity to attend college, compared with 45 percent in 1998.

Public Agenda and the National Center have studied public attitudes toward higher education since 1993. Their report, "Squeeze Play: How Parents and the Public Look at Higher Education Today," also found that many Americans—nearly two-thirds of parents of high school students (64 percent)—do not believe higher college costs are leading to more learning on campus.

Additionally, more than four in 10 (44 percent) believe that waste and mismanagement significantly factor into increasing college costs. And more than half say that colleges and universities could spend less and still provide a quality education.

At the same time, the survey, based on telephone interviews with more than 1,000 randomly selected adults, found that Americans have generally positive views of higher education, with 66 percent saying that colleges and universities teach students what they should know.

However, concerns about cost and access diminish such faith in higher education. The report found that 60 percent of Americans believe that increasing college costs

hit the middle class the hardest, since wealthy people can afford to pay exorbitant tuition and poor people are more likely to be eligible for financial aid.

Moreover, 78 percent of Americans agree that students borrow too much in order to pay for college. African-American and Hispanic parents—even from middle- and upper-class backgrounds—are most likely to believe that qualified students will not have access to college.

To download a copy of the entire report, go to www.makingopportunityaffordable.org.