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Moving The Campus Bookstore Online

by Aliya Sternstein

The concept of a one-stop online shop for college textbooks, where the titles are cheap and the profits are plenty, may sound like a far-off fantasy, but at least one major university is working on fulfilling that dream.

With the cost of tuition and educational materials soaring, the government has stepped in to make higher education more affordable for Americans. One recommendation of a federal advisory committee is to construct a centralized, online warehouse for buying instructional content.

"In the long term, the supply-driven, producer-centric market of today must be transformed into the demand-driven, college- and student-centric market of tomorrow," according to the year-long study from the Advisory Committee On Student Financial Assistance. It proposes a national digital marketplace capable of serving institutions, students, faculty, publishers and bookstores. The marketplace would combine a transaction and rights clearinghouse, e-commerce applications and a hosted infrastructure.

California State: Setting The Digital Example

A blueprint for a miniature model already exists at California State University. The system builds on a 12-year-old CSU Web-based resource, the Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching, or MERLOT. The service is a free collection of 16,000 online course materials that have been tailored to meet students' different learning styles.

It could take as little as four to five years to develop a similar national marketplace if the country leverages CSU's existing plans, according to the advisory panel's report.

Regan Caruthers, with CSU academic technology services, said the university will be displaying a part of its digital marketplace in October. A person will type in a keyword for a single search, triggering simultaneous queries across data repositories from both commercial and non-commercial sources, such as Pearson Digital, Bedford, Freeman & Worth Publishing, and MERLOT. The prototype then will combine the results of the various queries into one list.

"We want to create a singular Web presence for the discovery and usage of digital content," Caruthers said.

With a national digital marketplace, each academic institution would get a separate Internet storefront, but each would be connected to the warehouse's online infrastructure. Each "store" would customize its site with faculty-generated learning materials, intra-university communications and course syllabi.

The vision is that digital content exchanges eventually would support various transactions, including: direct sales of publisher content to students; the sharing of academic work and curricula among faculty; library-like "borrowing" of digital materials for one semester at a time; professors charging students for content a la eBay's online auction house; and students buying e-books from university online stores patterned after Amazon.com.

Skepticism Amid 'A Unique Opportunity'

Howard (Buck) McKeon of California, the House Education and Labor Committee's ranking Republican, and committee member David Wu, D-Ore., had requested the study on textbook costs last year. "A major challenge for this proposal is certainly going to be getting buy-in from the higher education community," McKeon spokesman Steve Forde said.

However, he said the fact that a major state university system is crafting a similar model should lend momentum to overcoming the challenge. "As the system is implemented in Mr. McKeon's home state," Forde said, "it will become clearer whether and where it needs to be improved if it is to be carried out in a broader way."

He said the report puts the "spotlight on costs" and "should serve as a unique opportunity for the higher education market to respond accordingly."

The American Association of Community Colleges has been working to broaden the items covered under certain tax credits to include books and transportation, according to spokeswoman Norma Kent. "With our average annual tuition of just over \$2,200," she said, "the cost of books can sometimes outstrip the cost of tuition itself for a community college student."

Kent called the idea of an online textbook warehouse "a possible, positive step" but added that "more needs to be known about the details of how this would work, who would pay for it and whether it would meet the needs of a diverse group of more 1,200 community colleges."

Brittney McCarthy, the federal relations director of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, said her group "shares the concern regarding prices of college textbooks and enthusiastically supports voluntary action on programs or ideas that help to keep college textbooks costs down. In general, we would be wary of federal legislation that would mandate specific actions."

Wu spokeswoman Jillian Schoene called the e-marketplace "a very long-term solution." She said Wu is more focused on what can be done to shape "a more consumer-driven market so that students start saving money -- right now."

The advisory committee predicted that many faculty and students still will favor print over digital text, but existing printing services at college bookstores could easily cater to their preferences. What will change, the panel said, is the ability of faculty to select only relevant chapters and pages for students to buy -- and "to pay only for materials actually used."

From The 12th Century To The 21st

Bruce Hildebrand, executive director for higher education at the Association of American Publishers, said publishers currently do not object to piecemeal orders, such as one chapter from a certain book, two from another book and one paper from a different author.

"Publishers are agnostic about how they deliver their content," he said, noting the current availability of no-frills, paperbound text/e-chapter compilations that are custom-designed by faculty. "Pretty covers are pretty covers, but that's not where the money is."

However, Hildebrand said, organizing a national digital marketplace is going to be "a huge challenge" because "everyone has got to agree on a uniform format, too." The panel's report acknowledged that standards development will be expensive and require "resources from all stakeholders."

As far as widespread participation, Hildebrand said, "My hypotheticals don't go out that far. Publishers are working with one project at the moment. And that's CSU." The association will wait and see, he said. "Producing and organizing materials is a laborious process ... and it is a never-ending process."

Caruthers' observation: "At times, I think [the publishers are] on the fence as to whether professors will use digital resources. If you go to any college campus, that college's campus is still full of textbooks. Like anything, it's an evolution. There are a lot of faculty doing innovative things ... but I would not characterize it as the mainstream practice."

She said the adaptation will take time. "We're basically evolving from a model that's been here since the 12th century."