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## Business

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Posted on Sun, Aug. 28, 2005

### Limiting textbooks' costs requires a lot of studying

By Kathy Kristof  
 The Los Angeles Times

Textbook prices have been rising at about twice the rate of inflation -- largely the result of special add-ons like CDs and workbooks -- according to a new report from the Government Accountability Office.

That's no surprise to Courtney Morse, a political science major in Portland, Ore., who says paying for textbooks loaded with little-used bells and whistles is becoming an overwhelming struggle.

"This report confirms what we have been saying all along," said Morse, a Portland State University sophomore who has joined the Student Public Interest Research Group, an advocacy organization. "The price of textbooks is devastating, and publishers are doing it on purpose."

Although some students simply call Mom and Dad when textbooks have blown their budget, Morse said she doesn't have that luxury: She's paying her college bills on her own. "When you are trying to come up with \$200 for books every semester and still pay for food and rent and classes, it's just horrendous," she said. "Last year, I was looking at whether I would pay for books or make my rent."

Textbook publishers, who have been asked to explain their pricing practices to Congress, contend that they're being made into scapegoats. They say their studies indicate that their prices have climbed more modestly than the 6 percent average annual increase reported in the GAO study.

To be sure, some books are pricey, said J. Bruce Hildebrand, executive director for higher education at the Association of American Publishers in Washington, D.C. But the high costs largely reflect professors' demands for constant updating, photographs, graphics and interactive tools that can help struggling students at any time over the Internet.

"Professors want these materials because it improves the success rate of their students," Hildebrand said.

He said publishers make low-cost versions of books. Some of the cut-rate options include custom books -- which print only the chapters that professors want -- and black-and-white texts. If a student is paying hundreds of dollars for a book, it's because the professor has ordered the Cadillac edition, Hildebrand said.

Ronald Miech, a math professor at UCLA, countered that if he had choices in ordering textbooks, it would be news to him. "I have never heard of a scaled-back version," he said.

Miech says he's often forced to order books bundled with workbooks and software that he never uses. "I've tried the software," he said. "I don't like it, and I never use it. But we don't seem to have an option of buying the book without it."

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By DAVID WETHE, STAR-TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER

Rep. David Wu, D-Ore., wants to change that. When the Higher Education Act is debated next month, it will include an amendment offered by Wu encouraging publishers to "unbundle" their books, selling the text, the workbooks and software "a la carte." He also wants publishers to provide more cost information to the professors who assign their books and professors to pay more attention to the prices.

In the meantime, enterprising students can:

Shop online. The most-popular book bought from AbeBooks.com last year was a marketing text that retails for \$140 but sells online for \$88 plus shipping, said Richard Davies, a company spokesman. The detriment to buying online is that it usually takes about a week to get the books.

Consider international editions. U.S. publishers often sell their books overseas for a fraction of the domestic retail price, said Merriah Fairchild, a higher-education advocate with the California Public Interest Research Group's student chapters. *Calculus: Early Transcendentals* sells for \$125 in the United States, \$97 in Canada and \$65 in Britain, Fairchild said.

Buy used. Students sometimes think they can't buy a used book if their professor is teaching from a new edition. But the new editions are sometimes only slightly altered versions of the old, Fairchild said. Ask the professor if you can use a previous year's edition.

Look for book swaps. There are several book-swapping services on the Web, Fairchild said. They're generally run by students and are for students on specific campuses. One such site, [www.CampusBookSwap.com](http://www.CampusBookSwap.com), lists dozens of schools where students can search for a specific text or simply view a list of the books other students have for sale on the site.

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*Kathy Kristof writes for the Los Angeles Times.*



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