

Abstract

Cabrillo College, founded in 1959, is a community college in Aptos, California that serves an increasingly diverse student body of approximately 24,000 students annually at its main campus and two nearby satellite sites. A quarter of the student body is Latino; at the College's satellite site in Watsonville, in the southern and predominantly Latino part of the County, 41 percent of the students represent the first generation in their families to attend college.

Against this backdrop, high textbook prices affect students' progress in significant ways. Students may forego needed textbooks for a course, or even conclude that college is not affordable and drop out — for a semester or, in too many cases, forever. In 2008, the California State Auditor reported that textbook costs accounted for nearly 60% of a California community college student's total education costs during the 2007-08 academic year.

High textbook prices are generally regarded to be a symptom of a much larger and more complex problem: a broken market in which the consumers who pay for the textbooks (students) are completely separated from those who manufacture and select the titles (publishers and faculty). Of many recommended remedies, Cabrillo College recently has focused on one that holds promise as a viable, sustainable approach to making textbooks more affordable: a hybrid textbook rental program. Recently launched as a small pilot program with 160 copies of three titles in mathematics and psychology, Cabrillo seeks through this proposal the funds to expand the pilot significantly, reaching a total of 30 titles (3% of new titles ordered each semester) and over 1,800 copies by the end of the 2-year grant period.

The pilot program already has the hallmarks of success. The return rate among participating students was 94%, far exceeding expectations. Students were able to rent titles for 40% of the cost of a new book — a significant reduction in price, yet one that allows the College's bookstore to recoup costs and add to the "fleet" of new titles within 3 years. The pilot also cemented a strong partnership among student leaders, interested faculty, bookstore managers, and College administrators, all of whom joined forces on a Textbook Rental Task Force that selected titles, approached faculty with information, secured agreements from faculty and students, and designed the program's features. We believe this hybrid program is innovative because it is integrated seamlessly with several other options (including new and used textbooks) and uses a fee structure that is designed to make the program self-sustaining after the initial outlay.

With a Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education grant, we plan to expand this model, evaluate it thoroughly, and document its successes as well as lessons learned, so that other postsecondary institutions can add textbook rental programs to their potential strategies for combating excessive textbook costs. Our primary objective is to make a greater proportion of textbooks more affordable for Cabrillo College students, which in turn will help remove an important financial barrier that influences whether students delay or forego their college educations for financial reasons alone.