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Cheating the Textbook System

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Cheating the Textbook System

Abstract

The price of my German textbook is equal to three months of rent with utilities back home. My books for Introduction to Cultural Anthropology equal the cost of feeding my family for a whole month. But these aren't news. American Enterprise Institute reports that the college textbook prices "are 812 percent higher than they were a little more than three decades ago."

Some students came to Gettysburg aware of costs, so they moved into first year dorms armed with Amazon Prime memberships and accounts on sites for renting textbooks. Some looked for classes that offer cheaper (or no) textbooks in advance. Because that seems to be our only solution: to learn to shrug shoulders at the injustice and adapt because we learned that it's normal to pay for education we're already paying so much for. Having textbooks is considered a required part of enrolling in classes, and the sacrifice that students have to make to afford them is taken for granted. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

books, Class, commodity, Education, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Hidden costs, Privilege, professors, Textbooks

Disciplines

Civic and Community Engagement

Comments

Surge is a student blog at Gettysburg College where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

! VERB 1 : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

CHEATING THE TEXTBOOK SYSTEM

September 15, 2019

The last flight of stairs, almost there. My fingertips find it hard to believe. With every step, there's more pressure and they're changing color. Five more steps, almost over. Loud *tup*, and the box is on the floor. I leave the box next to another box, this one white and unpacked with the logo of the new bookstore.

Here's a few (ir)relevant facts about me (and these boxes):

1. This is the beginning of my second year at Gettysburg.
2. There are 23 (text)books in these two boxes, some much larger than the others (the number would be bigger if I kept the rentals from the last year).
3. The 23 stacks of paper (used, paper copies) cost around \$1,300.
4. \$1,300 is 2,318 Bosnia-Herzegovina Convertible Marks, which is a fourth of my mother's yearly salary.

Shrug shoulders if you're sad, annoyed or infuriated

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I'm not alone

A friend of mine found out on the first day of class that there was a \$50 access code she'd have to pay. She approached the professor after class explaining that she didn't know about this cost because it was not listed on the bookstore website, and that she didn't have the money to pay for it. The professor had

assumed that everyone would be prepared to pay the \$50 out of pocket, and didn't have a plan for my friend when it wasn't true for her. My friend felt more isolated and helpless after talking to the professor.

For those of us clueless about the inner workings of US higher education, these costs came as a surprise. If accepting our offers from Gettysburg meant signing a contract, the truth about textbook costs was that really important information printed in tiny letters overlooked by the untrained eye. As an international student on a scholarship, coming from a country with an educational system completely different from the system here, I was unaware of the whole discourse on textbook prices.

(When I feel self critical, I acknowledge that I could've researched it in advance, but let's be real: when you have to think about your visa, work study programs so you can keep your scholarship, cultural differences, studying in the language you're not native in, dealing with all the things you need to learn by yourself because there is no one to explain it to you, and you need to comfort your parents for feeling helpless because of the language gap which prevents them from understanding or learning to understand the paperwork their child needs help with... Textbooks weren't on my mind.)

Yet myself and many other international, first generation, low income students who had similar issues ended up quickly adjusting. We joined the shoulder shrugging group after the initial shock, because there's nothing we could actually do.

Why are books so expensive?

So who's guilty? The publishing system that puts profit at the center of the textbook industry, which leads them to continuously raise prices. Because five corporations control 80% of the textbook market, there is a monopoly on the market. When publishers put out new editions of the same book every single year, is that motivated by relevancy or profit? And finally, publishers increasingly put information behind more and more closed doors: more access codes to online textbooks and all kinds of models that are designed to kill the used textbooks and rental market.

And professors are not entirely blameless, in particular when they do not take into consideration the costs of course materials. It is analogous to doctors prescribing expensive medicine to patients; in both cases, the people making decisions about purchases (medicine or textbooks) are NOT the ones who have to pay for it (patients and students), and we see in both industries how this leads to skyrocketing costs.

How to be a rebel

At Gettysburg, the honor code is a priority: cheating strictly forbidden – except cheating the textbook system (that's strongly encouraged). Students find cheaper options from less reliable sites, scour the library for other options or simply don't buy the book they can't afford—limiting their chances of succeeding in class. Books continue to be an indicator of social and economic class: separating those who can afford them from those who cannot.

From theory to real people

Commodity fetishism is a concept that explores connections between commodities (e.g. textbooks) and money (e.g. textbook prices) exchanged in the market (e.g. Gettysburg College) rather than how this production impacts relationships among the people (e.g. students of different socioeconomic backgrounds who are alienated from the community because of their inability to partake in the commodity exchange). While economy explains it, real people are in the center of it. Textbooks are educating materials and shouldn't be treated as a commodity in the marketplace. As a commodity that serves as a maximizer of profit rather than knowledge, textbooks become a means to limit access to quality education. Gettysburg College students struggle daily with the lack of equal starting points and the textbook stress isn't making the issue smaller.

Education (and with it all the learning materials) should be accessible for everyone. This isn't a conversation about political spectrum and where you stand on it. It's about not making education a privilege. Textbook costs are one of the ways to make education more exclusive than it already is. And quite frankly, our college's lethargy and borderline indifference about this issue is hurtful. Gettysburg College has to start prioritizing finding the alternatives to textbooks that are a part of the systemic issue that challenges all of its students.

One area that is working to support faculty on making these changes is the Scholarly Communications Department of the library. I'm proud to be part of the collective that focuses on promoting discourse on open materials and access in general. Raising awareness about these alternative options and starting a conversation with faculty about costs and information access is the biggest of the small steps we could take. For instance, the library is conducting a student textbook survey to explore the impacts of the high costs of course materials at the Gettysburg College student body. The data will inform the department's efforts to support faculty who want to reduce the costs of their course materials, as well as strategies to reduce the material prices in general. The survey is open until Monday, September 16th, but we are more than open to continue this conversation even after the survey is finished.

The survey is available to students at www.bit.ly/gburgbooks.

If you have any questions or would like to be a part of the conversation, please contact me.

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