Course Correction:
Executive
Summary

By Nicole Allen, Director, Make Textbooks Affordable Campaign

From *Course Correction: How Digital Textbooks Are Off Track, and How to Set Them Straight* (Chicago: Student PIRGs, 2008). Reprinted with permission. See <http://www.maketextbooksaffordable.org>.

Textbooks are an essential but increasingly expensive part of obtaining a college degree. With students spending between $700 and $1,000 per year and prices rising faster than inflation, the need for a solution is increasingly urgent.

Digital textbooks are a promising way to lower costs for students. The digital format has the potential to cut production costs, increase options for students, and open up the market to more competition.

Digital textbooks are now beginning to gain a more prominent position in the textbooks marketplace, making it a critical time to ensure that they are on the right track. We are concerned, however, that digital textbooks are on the wrong track.

The Student PIRGs conducted this study to determine how digital textbooks can live up to their potential as a solution. Through a survey of 504 students from Oregon and Illinois and 50 commonly assigned textbook titles, we confirm three fundamental criteria—affordability, printing options, and accessibility. We found that publishers' digital "e-textbooks" fail to meet these criteria, and that an emerging form of digital textbooks—open textbooks—are a perfect match.

Report Findings

1. Digital textbooks must meet three criteria—affordable, printable and accessible

First, digital textbooks must be more affordable than traditional books. In order to be a solution to high costs, digital
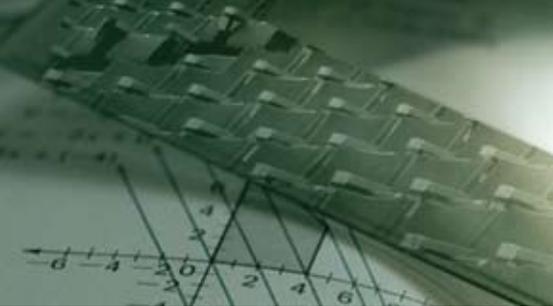
textbooks must cost less than traditional books. That means digital textbooks must be priced lower than the net cost of buying a textbook—the purchase price minus the amount the student can expect to receive for selling it back to the bookstore.

Second, digital textbooks must be straightforward and inexpensive to print. Printing makes digital textbooks practical for students with different reading and learning styles. Though no one format is right for everyone, students seem to have a general preference for printed books over computer screens.

- Student comfort reading on a computer screen varied greatly among the students we surveyed. 33% were comfortable, 22% were uncomfortable, and 45% were in the middle.
- 75% of the students we surveyed said they would prefer a printed textbook to a digital textbook and 60% said they would buy a low-cost print copy even if a digital book were free.

Third, digital textbooks must be accessible. Students should be able to access digital textbooks online, store them for use offline, and keep a copy for future use. First, it is fair. Once a student buys a textbook, it should be theirs to keep and access wherever and whenever they want. Second, anything less than complete access would make digital books impractical for large numbers of students with limited access to computers and/or the internet.

- 45% of the students we surveyed said limited computer access would make it at least somewhat difficult to use a digital textbook.
- 71% said they have kept at least one textbook for future reference.

2. Digital textbooks done wrong: e-textbooks fail to meet the criteria
The first type of digital text we reviewed was e-textbooks, the digital book format

offered by the major publishers through CourseSmart. We found that they fall short on each of the three criteria we found digital textbooks must meet.

E-textbooks are too expensive:

- The e-textbooks we surveyed cost on average exactly the same as a new hard copy of the same title bought and sold back to the bookstore.
- The e-textbooks we surveyed cost on average 39% more than a used hard copy of the same title bought and sold back online.

Printing is costly and difficult:

- Printing was limited to 10 pages per session for each of the e-textbooks we surveyed.
- Buying and printing half of an e-textbook was three times the cost of buying a used hard copy and selling it back to the bookstore, for the books we surveyed.

E-textbooks are difficult to access:

- Students have to choose between using the book online or using it offline—they cannot do both.
- Most (75%) of the e-textbooks we surveyed expired after 180 days, so students do not have the option to access their books in the future.

3. Digital textbooks done right: open textbooks meet all of the criteria
Open textbooks are textbooks distributed free digitally under an open license. The key feature of an open license is that it permits users to make copies of the textbook and translate it into different formats. So, open textbooks start as digital textbooks but can be printed in a variety of formats. We found that open textbooks accomplish what e-textbooks do not: low prices, printing options and accessibility.

Open textbooks are affordable. Open

textbooks are free digitally, and students can purchase other formats at a low cost.

Open textbooks are easy and inexpensive to print. Students can print digital textbooks anytime, anywhere and in a variety of formats. They can print individual pages at home, order a print-on-demand bound copy, or anything in between.

Open textbooks are accessible. Students can access open textbooks anytime, from any computer, without the book expiring.

Conclusions
Digital textbooks are a promising solution to lower costs, but they need to be done the right way
This study finds that digital textbooks need to meet three main criteria in order to maximize their potential: they must be affordable, printable, and accessible. The two major players in the digital textbook right now—e-textbooks and open textbooks—are examples of digital textbooks done the wrong way and digital textbooks done the right way.

Publishers should meet the criteria
Right now, publishers are on a crash course with e-textbooks. They are expensive and impractical for a large portion of the student population. Publishers should take a lesson from open textbooks and adjust their course toward meeting the criteria established in this report.

Institutions and faculty should help bring more open textbooks on the market
Open textbooks are the right way to take advantage of the benefits of digital textbooks, so faculty and institutions should do everything they can to bring more open textbooks onto the market. For faculty, this means giving preference to open textbooks whenever pedagogically appropriate. For institutions, this means providing incentives to faculty authors and pooling resources to develop a viable infrastructure to support open textbooks.