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Monday, Feb 02, 2004

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Education

Posted on Fri, Jan. 30, 2004

Students to fight book prices

REPORT TARGETS INCREASES, COLLEGE TEXT AFFORDABILITY

By Becky Bartindale
Mercury News

As the cost of college climbs, California students are organizing to push back against one of their perennial complaints: the high price of textbooks.

And they aren't the only ones. Several state legislators said Thursday they'll do what they can to help.

Students spend an average of \$898 a year on textbooks, up from \$642 seven years ago, according to surveys conducted by the University of California. Some explanations for the price increase are spelled out in a report, ``Ripoff 101," released Thursday by the student version of CALPIRG, the California Public Interest Research Group.

``A lot of students like myself are struggling to pay for books," said San Jose State University junior Jonathan Stoll, who estimates his book costs will reach about \$500 this semester. His most expensive book was \$120, he said.

``With fee increases and book prices going up, people definitely are feeling it a lot more," said Alice Lee, vice president of the San Jose State Associated Students.

The CALPIRG report identifies several ways college textbooks could be made more affordable.

- Sixty-five percent of the faculty members surveyed at University of California campuses said they rarely or never use the supplemental materials that routinely come bundled with textbooks, such as workbooks and CD-ROMs, the student researchers found. Yet half of all textbooks now come packaged with such extras. More books should be sold ``unbundled," the students said, because the bundled packages can cost twice as much as the textbook alone.

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- Textbook publishers put out new editions every few years, sometimes with only minor changes. The new editions make obsolete the old editions that are sold less expensively as used books. About 40 percent of the faculty who responded to the survey said the changes in the texts rarely or never justified a new edition. Nearly 90 percent said they would support including new information in a supplement instead of a new edition.

Democratic Assembly member Carol Liu, D-Pasadena, chairwoman of the Assembly Higher Education Committee, said Thursday she and others will introduce legislation intended to persuade publishers to provide more unbundled textbooks and explain changes in new editions, and encourage faculty to consider price when choosing books.

Publishers typically provide faculty and their graduate teaching assistants with free textbooks, said Purdue University math professor Bradley Lucier, who publishes textbooks online. ``Right now, universities are insulated from the price of books," he said. ``The people who make decisions about which textbooks to use don't take price into account."

In the meantime, students are looking for ways to beat the high prices.

The Associated Students at San Jose State started an online book exchange last fall (see www.as.sjsu.edu/in dex1024.html). Students pay \$1 to have their used books posted on the student government Web site. CALPIRG also has launched a national online book site, www.campusbookswap.com.

Students are increasingly turning to online vendors, such as Amazon.com, where they sometimes can get the same books from Canadian or European vendors for significantly less than in the United States.

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