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AN INVESTIGATION OF STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON CLASSROOM RESOURCE USEFULNESS

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Central to the post-secondary education is the textbook, and central to complaints regarding post-secondary education is also the textbook. Textbook use and price are a serious issue at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and at other colleges and universities around the country. Concern regarding textbooks inspires students to become very vocal, filing complaint after complaint regarding the price, the quality, and the utilization of textbooks in the status quo. This is an issue that inflames the hearts (and empties the wallets) of many students, and therefore should be an issue of concern with the university. In two separate studies surveying students at MSU, it has come to our attention that textbooks are overpriced and underutilized, and something ought to be done to help remedy this problem.

Central to the post-secondary education is the textbook, and central to complaints regarding post-secondary education is also the textbook. Textbook use and price are a serious issue at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and at other colleges and universities around the country. Concern regarding textbooks inspires students to become very vocal, filing complaint after complaint regarding the price, the quality, and the utilization of textbooks in the status quo. In response to a survey administered to MSU students, one angered student commented,

“As a professor, I would be ashamed to force each new class of students to collectively pay thousands of dollars for textbooks. This is especially true when the textbook is barely used. Each semester, thousands of students are required by their instructors to make specific purchases, thus creating a vicious cycle of price inflation. As prices rise, these mandatory purchases rely increasingly on student loans and grants, which then continue to rise in response to rising prices. Where is the accountability? If teachers were personally subject to the same purchasing demands they place on their students, there would be a miraculous increase in low-cost alternatives to high-priced books.”

Another student wrote,

“Textbooks are generally a waste of money. I can get through most of my classes without even cracking the textbook. A lot of professors who “require” textbooks never even reference them. And then, we get pennies when we sell them back to the bookstore, if they’ll even take them back at all. Textbooks should only be required if the reading is REQUIRED AND TESTED ON. If there is no test on the reading, then the textbook should be optional.”

This is an issue that inflames the hearts (and empties the wallets) of many students, and therefore should be an issue of concern with the university. In two separate studies surveying students at MSU, it has come to my attention that textbooks are overpriced and underutilized, and something ought to be done to help remedy this problem.

Method

Participants

Study One was conducted by the student interest group Students4Students in December 2005 using the Zoomerang online survey software. An email notification/request was sent to every student on campus (approximately 14,000 students), and in 36 hours, 1316 students, approximately 9.4 percent, responded anonymously to the survey. The respondents were members of the university colleges in the following percentages: College of Allied Health and Nursing, 19 percent; College of Arts and Humanities, 10 percent; College of Business, 19 percent; College of Education, 13 percent; College of Science, Engineering, and Technology, 17 percent; College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, 17 percent; undeclared, 10 percent; and other, 2 percent.

Survey Two was administered in April 2006. In order to find participants, we emailed every department chairperson at the university to explain our project and ask them to allow us to survey their students. We also asked them to forward our request to members of their departments. We asked the instructors to administer the surveys to the students. The students were then to put the completed surveys in an envelope which the last student would seal. The professor was to send the completed surveys to us via our advisor through intercampus mail. If an instructor wanted to participate in the survey, but

did not want to administer the survey, Josh would administer the survey. Twenty-one instructors in the six undergraduate colleges responded offering us access to their 1465 students. Three-hundred-ninety-one surveys representing students taking classes in four colleges (Arts and Humanities, Business, Allied Health and Nursing, and Social and Behavioral Sciences) were returned. The 391 respondents were from the following colleges: lower level Arts and Humanities students, 28 percent; upper level Arts and Humanities students, 10 percent; upper level College of Business students, 27 percent; lower level Social and Behavioral Sciences students, 11 percent; lower level Allied Health and Nursing students, 8 percent; and upper level Allied Health and Nursing students, 16 percent. Colleges were divided by upper and lower level classes because behaviors and expectations often change between general classes (100/200) and classes in a major (300/400).

Survey Instruments

Survey One asked a total of seven questions and provided space for students to write comments. One question asked students to identify the college they were a member of. Five questions asked students to grade the price and use of textbooks and other class materials using an A-F scale modeled after the grade scale. Another question asked students who they felt was most responsible for the price of textbooks.

Survey Two asked students a total of 13 questions. Two of the questions on the survey asked what college the class the survey was completed in and what level the class was (100/200, 300/400, 500/600). Students were also asked whether or not the class had required textbooks and/or additional materials such as print shop materials, handouts, online materials, etc, and whether these materials were primary or supplemental. Four questions were then asked to determine how often students completed the textbook reading and the additional reading, and whether or not grades were tied to the readings and how the readings related to class lecture/discussion. Finally, students were asked what grade they expected to receive in the class and how often they attended class.

Results

Survey One

The survey indicated that there is a serious problem regarding the price and use of textbooks at MSU. When asked to grade the use of textbooks in the classroom, 4 percent rated use as an A, 27 percent as a B, 39 percent as a C, 23 percent as a D, and 6 percent as an F.

The grades for the professor's utilization of textbooks in class received the following: A, 5 percent; B, 20 percent, C, 44 percent; D, 23 percent, and F, 7 percent.

In regards to the grades students would give the price of textbooks, 0 percent of students gave the price an A, 4 percent gave textbook price a B, 15 percent rated it as a C, 33 percent of students gave the textbook prices a D, and the price of textbooks received an F from 48 percent of students.

In response to how well professors utilized textbook alternatives or supplements such as a course management system such as Desire 2 Learn (d2l), handouts, or print shop alternatives, 8 percent of students gave professors an A, 17 percent a B, 22 percent a C, 24 percent a D, 21 percent an F, and 9 percent responded not applicable.

Students were asked to grade the effectiveness and content of the alternative materials, 19 percent gave the materials an A, 36 percent a B, 19 percent a C, 6 percent an D, 2 percent an F, and 18 percent responded not applicable.

Finally, students were asked who they felt was most responsible for the high cost of textbooks; publishers; bookstores; or professors. Thirty-nine percent believed publishers were most responsible, while 54 percent attributed the most responsibility to bookstores, and 7 percent believed professors were most responsible for the problem.

At the end of the survey, students had the option to write a comment relating to textbooks. Five-hundred-sixty-nine students wrote comments.

Survey Two

In the Arts and Humanities classes, 93 percent of the lower level (100/200) students reported that the class had a required textbook and 51 percent of the upper level (400/500) students reported that the class had a required textbook. One hundred percent of the students taking a class in the other colleges reported having a required textbook.

Students who had a required textbook were then asked whether or not there were assigned readings from the textbook(s). The assigned readings are as follows: Arts and Humanities lower, 98 percent; Arts and Humanities upper, 74 percent; College of Business upper, 86 percent; Social and Behavioral Sciences lower, 65 percent; Allied Health and Nursing lower, 94 percent; and Allied Health and Nursing upper, 97 percent.

Students were asked how often they completed the assigned readings from textbook for their class: always, sometimes, never, only before a test, and not applicable. Lower level Arts and Humanities students responded as follows: always, 18 percent; sometimes, 60 percent; never, 4 percent; only before a test, 15 percent; and not applicable, 2 percent. Upper level Arts and Humanities students: always, 35 percent; sometimes, 59 percent; and not applicable, 6 percent. Upper level College of Business students: always, 30 percent; sometimes, 34 percent; never, 6 percent; and only before a test, 31 percent. Lower level Social and Behavioral Science students: always, 36 percent; sometimes, 29 percent; never, 21 percent; and only before a test, 14 percent. Lower level Allied Health and Nursing students: always, 6 percent; sometimes 61 percent; never, 19 percent; and only before a test, 13 percent. Upper level Allied Health and Nursing students: always, 2 percent; sometimes, 54 percent; never, 11 percent; only before a test, 31 percent; and not applicable, 2 percent. Not all of the groups of students add up to one hundred percent due to rounding.

Percentages of students in the following classes reported having non-textbook materials as primary or supplementary class requirements: Arts and Humanities lower, 74 percent; Arts and Humanities Upper, 82 percent; College of Business Upper, 87 percent; Social and Behavioral Sciences Lower, 5 percent; Allied Health and Nursing Lower, 94 percent; and Allied Health and Nursing Upper, 92 percent.

Students who stated that they did have non-textbook materials for their classes were then asked how often they read the materials: always, sometimes, never, only before a test, or not applicable. Lower level Arts and Humanities students responded as follows: always, 34 percent; sometimes, 55 percent; never, 4 percent; and only before a test, 8 percent. Upper level Arts and Humanities students: always, 41 percent; and sometimes, 59 percent. Upper level College of Business students: always, 64 percent; sometimes, 32 percent; and only before a test, 4 percent. Lower level Social and Behavioral Science students: always, 50 percent; and sometimes, 50 percent. Lower level Allied Health and Nursing students: always, 71 percent; sometimes 23 percent; and only before a test, 3 percent. Upper level Allied Health and Nursing students: always, 41

percent; sometimes, 43 percent, only before a test, 14 percent; and not applicable, 2 percent. Not all groups of students add up to 100 due to rounding.

Students were asked whether or not grades corresponded with reading assignments. Ninety-two percent of lower level Arts and Humanities students reported that there were corresponding grades, and 8 percent stated there were not corresponding grades. Forty-nine percent of upper level Arts and Humanities students reported that there were corresponding grades, 33 percent stated there were not corresponding grades, and 18 percent stated that it was not applicable. Ninety-three percent of upper level College of Business students reported that there were corresponding grades, 4 percent stated there were not corresponding grades, and 3 percent stated that it was not applicable. Fifty-one percent of lower level Social and Behavioral Science students reported that there were corresponding grades, 28 percent stated there were not corresponding grades, and 23 percent stated that it was not applicable. Fifty-two percent of lower level Allied Health and Nursing students reported that there were corresponding grades, and 48 percent stated there were not corresponding grades. Seventy-nine percent of upper level Allied Health and Nursing students reported that there were corresponding grades, and 21 percent stated there were not corresponding grades.

Students were asked whether or not they felt class materials (textbooks and non-textbook materials) were useful or not (or non-applicable) in aiding their understanding of class content. Eighty-one percent of lower level Arts and Humanities students felt class materials were useful, 18 percent did not think they were useful, and 1 percent responded that they were not applicable. Seventy-seven percent of upper level Arts and Humanities students felt the class materials were useful, 8 percent felt they were not useful, and 15 percent responded that it was not applicable. Eighty-seven percent of upper level College of Business students considered materials to be useful and 13 percent did not think they were useful. Seventy-four percent of the lower level Social and Behavioral Science students thought the class materials were useful, 16 percent did not think they were useful, and 5 percent responded that it was non-applicable. Ninety-four percent of lower level Allied Health and Nursing students considered class materials to be useful, and 6 percent responded that it was not applicable. Ninety-four percent of upper level Allied Health and Nursing students believed the class materials were useful, and six percent did not think they were useful.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this research. First of all, the study reflected opinions, which are very subjective and inherently biased.

Second, the scope of this study is limited. Only four colleges were surveyed, and there was not a very broad range of classes surveyed. Had more classes and the other colleges been included, results may have been different. For example, a textbook may be more essential in a math class than in a speech class.

Due to the way the surveys were administered with the professors having to handle the completed surveys in order to send them to us, some students may have felt uncomfortable answering honestly for fear that the professor might read the comments. This may have skewed some results.

Finally, the basis of professor's volunteer participation in this study is a significant limitation. If professors had reason to believe they did not effectively

incorporate class materials into their classes, they would be less likely to volunteer to participate in the survey.

Discussion

Clearly, this research illustrates that issues concerning class-material at Minnesota State University need to be addressed. As reported by students, professors are only doing a mediocre job incorporating textbooks into classes. This issue should be addressed with the faculty. Simply having increased awareness may prompt many to try to better their use of the textbook in their classes, but others may need training in how to incorporate textbooks. As college faculty are not required to take pedagogy classes like K-12 teachers are, many instructors, especially adjunct instructors, do not know how to successfully incorporate a textbook into their classes. Training would likely be very useful in providing them with beneficial skills. Additionally, I have heard anecdotes from several faculty members saying there is pressure from the administration to use a textbook, whether one is really needed or not. While I cannot confirm this, if the administration does promote the use of textbooks, even if a class does not need one and/or the professor is not equipped to incorporate it, this attitude should be changed to make classes and their materials more useful and economical for students, and also for the benefit of the staff.

Questions regarding the use of classroom material should also be part of the evaluations students complete at the end of the semester. This would give professors additional information and feedback to help them understand the needs of students and be able to better teach the students. This information could help instructors become more effective teachers.

In addition to providing better training on textbook use, instructors should not require textbooks if readings and assignments do not correspond with grades, as most students do not complete the reading if a grade is not required, making it pointless for instructors and students, as well as a waste of money. Blame for the problem of few students completing their reading as assigned does not rest solely on the faculty, however. Students need to be held accountable for mastering the content, but for a variety of factors, few students are motivated and/or have the time to do much non-required or non-essential work. Thus, grades are the primary way in which instructors can hold students accountable because if a grade is tied in some way to the reading, be it through a quiz, a paper, questions, or another means of assessment, students are more likely to view the assignment as important and are more likely to complete the assignment. Classes ought to be designed to foster frequent and critical readings of the materials.

Additionally, research indicates that students are significantly more likely to complete reading assignments that are not from textbooks, but rather are from other sources such as d2l, handouts, the print shop, etc. While many factors may play into this, such as how interesting the materials are, the format or style, the length, or class time provided to read the materials, it seems as if encouragement of the use of non-textbook materials to replace, or at the very least, supplement textbooks should be significantly increased in order to increase student learning.

The research also indicates that though students do not always read their assignments, they do perceive the materials to be useful. Because students already have a positive attitude regarding the usefulness of the material, they are likely to be responsive

to changes in classes which would require reading and have assessments to check for student learning from the reading.

Students are extremely dissatisfied with the price of textbooks, which the university itself cannot directly control, but it can take actions to help alleviate the costs. Currently, little has been done by the university to help students alleviate the prohibitive costs of textbooks. In the fall of 2005, the student senate attempted to contact publishers to devise a deal for lower prices, but the companies were not receptive. The university has not taken any other actions to help students, which is a shame because action would be an effective marketing tool in recruiting prospective students and would be extremely beneficial to current students, many of whom indicated on the comment section of Survey One that the cost of some textbooks prevents them from purchasing the book.

There are several actions the university could take to help students with the costs of textbooks, such as encouraging instructors to not use a textbook if it is not necessary. Instructors should be encouraged to use non-textbook materials more, and in many cases, a print shop packet may be more useful and more utilized than a textbook. To supplement or replace textbooks, the university could help departments develop non-textbook materials. The university could seek grants to help develop a textbook rental system or to develop online textbooks for students. It has become clear that no outside group is going to solve the problem for the students and the university, so it is time for the university to further look into this issue for solutions it can implement on its own.

Virtually no research has been done analyzing students perspectives on class materials. This is an area that certainly warrants future study by MSU and other universities in order to help students obtain the best education possible.