

Professors could prevent students' buyback woes

It happens at the end of every term. I'm at the University Bookstore's \$60 textbook counter, gripping my fat, \$60 textbook so tight that my knuckles are turning white. I am broke; my financial aid has dried up. I'm counting on getting some money back from that book.

I step up to the counter and hand it over, praying for the full 60 percent refund. The counter person takes my book and says, "That'll be five dollars."

"Five dollars," I exclaim. "But why?" Counter person informs me that the edition has been updated or that the professor will no longer be using that text, and then offers me some candy that is kept on the counter for occasions such as these.

I want to kick, holler and hurl my book through a window. But of course it's not counter person's fault. I know that it's irrational to punish the messenger of ill tidings. It's not the bookstore's fault; it has no control over publishing prices. So I leave the bookstore, furious and powerless.

And in many ways students are powerless. We have no control over the prices that publishers set, nor do we control the many factors that inflate book prices.

The bookstore does what it can. Each term it gives a 9 percent discount to students. Last year the bookstore gave students \$640,000 worth of book discounts out of its own pocket. According to manager Jim Williams, only 50 university bookstores of some 3,500 nationwide stores offer any discount, so we're pretty lucky.

The bookstore also buys books back when possible, but when professors decide to change books or update an edition, the book-



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store can't do a thing.

But all is not lost. Professors, if willing, could be our knights in shining armor. They could help contain students' textbook costs. It would take a bit of work on everyone's part, but when students are paying up to \$300 a term for books, someone needs to do something.

In this fine institution, it is common practice to update editions every two years. When a book is updated, the student who wants to sell back the book loses his or her 60 percent buy back price. The student who then buys the new edition must pay full price for the book, prices as high as \$70. Every two years, two sets of students lose money.

So why the practice of updating? Though publishers often update editions, professors and departments are not required to use the newer edition. They could opt to use the older edition. If there were a shortage of the older edition, the bookstore would stock both editions. In most cases, the updated editions are almost identical to their predecessors.

If a book is to be updated, there ought to be a legitimate reason for it. A new cover and a few rewritten chapters does not cut it. Some thought should go into the deci-

sion of whether or not to update, rather than rely on the wasteful tradition of updating every two years.

I have to wonder if professors give any thought to updating and changing books. Do they realize that with the stroke of a pen, they can put a student in financial straits or at the very least make tight budgets much tighter? I have had some caring profs, who actually chose not to assign a particular book because it was too expensive. But it seems that professors feel that money and other lowly factors should not drive their teaching.

But they must realize that money does drive our education. What they don't seem to realize is that the amount of money we shell out for books adversely affects our education.

Sometimes a book will be worth its high price, and it should be assigned. But too many students are paying too much money for books that don't teach them much. All professors need to think before they act.

The bookstore is willing and able to work with professors to help students save money. If professors teaching annual classes would guarantee to use the same book the following year, the bookstore would then buy back the books after the term in which they were used. The student taking the class would get a fat refund, and next year's student could buy the book for the used price. This wouldn't work in every case and for some, but it could work for some.

And finally we have that unquestioned practice of professors assigning their own books, a

sort of academic masturbation. This happens more in some departments than others. Professors claim that they assign their own books because their books are the best option for the class they are teaching. That's real nice in principle, but unfortunately that's all too seldom the reality.

The reality is that students are often assigned texts that are inappropriate for the class in which they are used. Sometimes we are required to buy poorly written texts, or buy a book that is unnecessary for the class. One has to wonder why so many of these "lemon" texts happen to be written by the professor.

Perhaps I have been extraordinarily unlucky, but the majority of professor-scribed texts that I have been assigned have been terrible. One such book was blatantly aimed at businesses, and was not very relevant for the student audience.

It seems clear that professors are not the most ideal parties to objectively judge the academic worth of their books.

It's not that professors are greedy; they aren't getting rich off of book sales. In the academic world, the golden rule is "publish or perish." When students buy their professors' books, it helps to guarantee that professor's academic position by providing a demand for their work. I think in many cases it's an ego boost to assign your own creation. But we're not here to pad their book sales. It's not our responsibility to help them secure their tenures. They are here for us; they need to be reminded of that. If their books are not assigned at other

schools on the basis of the books' merit, then maybe they should write better books.

Some professors do write useful, insightful books, and some professors need to assign their own books because the topic is so extremely specialized that no one else has written about it. These should be the exceptional and rare cases. If profs are going to assign their own books, there had better be some intense soul searching as to why.

So students, stop shouting at the bookstore people. If you are getting angry and frustrated with book prices, go talk to your professors. Ask them to work with you and to take your needs into account. We can control book prices; we just have to push academia's hand a bit. Because if we don't speak up and give professors a nudge, it will be we, the students, who get the proverbial shaft every time.

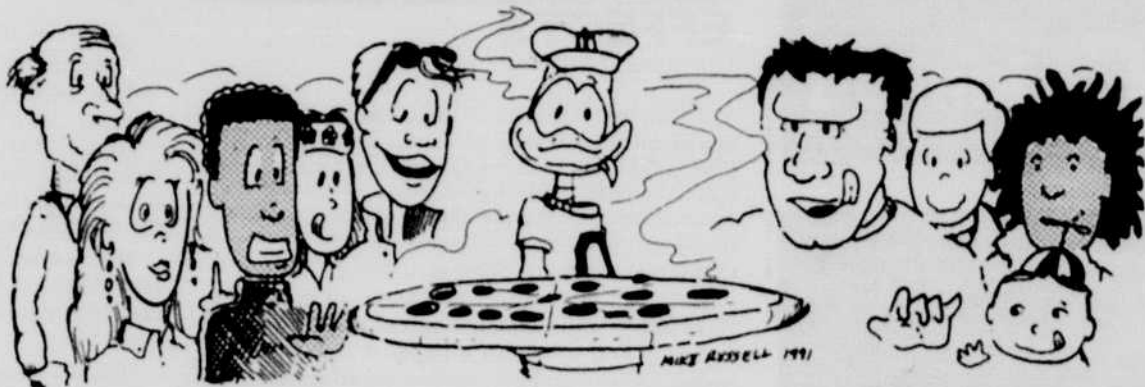
Gayle Forman is a columnist for the Emerald.

■ CORRECTION

The editorial in the Oct. 24 *Emerald* incorrectly reported that a Black Student Union officer called the Student Senate racist for refusing the BSU's funding request for a new computer. The officer in fact called the computer funding policy, and not the Senate, racist.

The *Emerald* regrets the error, but otherwise stands by the editorial.

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