

COMMENTARY

Wednesday, October 1, 2003

EDITORIAL

Options to lower textbook prices exist at all levels

As this week has probably unpleasantly reminded you (or shocked you, if you're a freshman), college textbooks can be nearly prohibitively expensive. Some students scrape by at the beginning of the term, shelling out an additional \$300 on top of ballooning tuition — which this year for the first time topped \$5,000 for the typical resident student. Others sometimes register for, or drop classes, based on the cost of the textbooks.

Some texts are massive, and massively expensive: The University Bookstore's most expensive offering will leave a \$198 dent in a biology or chemistry major's bank account. For a student taking 16 credit hours, that adds 48 percent to the cost of the class.

In light of the high cost of textbooks — particularly when their buyers are students already largely financially restricted — the bookstore graciously offered a promotion that ran through Wednesday wherein the bookstore would give 13 randomly selected students their coursebooks for free. But, of course, the bookstore cannot afford to give away texts to every student.

Here are several suggestions to alleviate fiscal pressure on the University's other 20,000 students:

- Departments should strongly consider cost when selecting primary texts. Many, if not all programs on campus, likely understand the importance of thriftiness to students and already factor pricing into decisions, but the cost of certain books suggests that monetary considerations sometimes take a back seat.
- Professors should assign secondary texts cautiously, too. Certainly, most classes need at least one book for grounding discussion or homework. But there's usually little reason to assign a second "required" text from which only one chapter will be assigned. If the content is essential, perhaps the professor, or even a GTF, could create a packet or a handout that covers the same material. Not only would the packet be more finely tuned to the class' specific themes and requirements, but it could be easily adjusted and re-used every term or year.
- Textbook publishing companies should strive to minimize differences among editions, as long as such conservatism doesn't hurt the applicability of the material. Re-vamping texts every few years makes sense in rapidly changing fields like computer science or multimedia design, but rewriting swaths of Chinese history books or arbitrarily rewriting problems in a math book without changing content only makes it needlessly more difficult for cash-strapped students to save money by tracking down used, older editions.

Unfortunately, this suggestion clashes with book publishers' interests: Publishers now cycle new editions on a biennial basis because people stop buying new copies of an edition once used ones become available, Chris Standish, the bookstore's book division manager, said.

In the meantime, the texts professors assign are mostly out of your control. But there are at least a few options for cutting costs: The bookstore sells used textbooks for 25 percent off. Smith Family Bookstore and other local used book vendors sell at discounts, too. Finally, online services like TextbookX.com and Half.com often offer books at a slick discount, but you have to wait (and sometimes pay) for shipping.

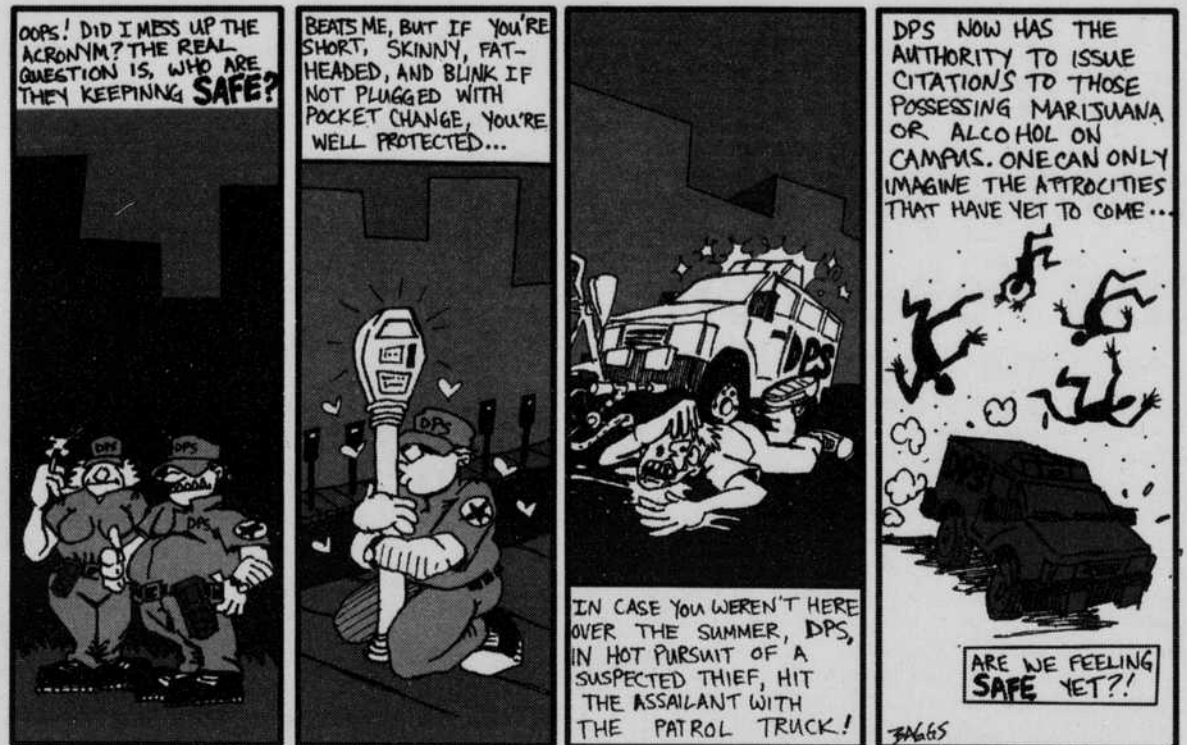
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DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC STUPIDITY



Steve Baggs Illustrator

MISPLACED SPOTLIGHT

This time of year always makes me physically ill. Right as school starts back up, sports are everywhere. The baseball season is drawing toward its celebrated conclusion, football is picking up serious steam, basketball season is but a short month from tip-off and those stupid stock cars are still pointlessly zooming around in circles.

With the Ducks' recent win against Michigan and their subsequent appearance on the cover of Sports Illustrated, I've found all the sports hubbub to be too much. Lately I've taken to distracting myself with visions of sugarplums and a world in which people actually give a damn.

Join me now as we pretend we live in a country where its citizens are engaged and motivated to take part in the decisions affecting their daily lives. Imagine, for a moment, a system of politics modeled after our major sports leagues.

Instead of using precious tax dollars to build athletic arenas — which the National Center for Policy Analysis has shown to be of no great benefit to the venues' communities — we would construct great stadiums that house professional political matches.

Every Sunday, hundreds of thousands of spectators would flock to these magnificent structures to cheer on their favorite politicians, pundits and policies — occasionally they might even want to throw a random beer bottle.

Kids would collect and trade politician cards. Dozens of channels, with their



Joe Bechard
Cultural obstetrician

glitzy production capabilities, would broadcast the events with all-star color commentators and sideline reporters.

In-depth analysis, instant replay, pregame statistics, field microphones and a nifty pen that highlights key plays for the viewing audience would accompany all broadcasts and add to viewers' comprehension of the many complexities and nuances of the competition.

Yes, politicians and lobbyists will get the most scrutiny in my little reality. The paparazzi would chase them all over, exposing their secret meetings and other professional improprieties. Entire sections of newspapers would be dedicated solely to politics, and the participants' statistics would be posted daily for all to see.

But my world will never exist, and part of the reason is we're all so damn distracted by stardom and entertainment. Society and the well-being of the people sitting next to you are of much lesser importance than how fast Rusty Wallace tore through 20 tires and

several tanks of gas or how many RBIs Alex Rodriguez hits in nine innings. According to Knight Ridder, the five major professional sports leagues — hockey, NASCAR, basketball, baseball and football — will see revenues increase by more than 50 percent from 2001 to 2006. All the money, work and mental capacity that went into these leagues is wasted on something that matters little in the big picture of life.

How often do you have to listen to some guy spit sports statistics or see someone wearing officially licensed merchandise? How many people do you notice turning straight to the sports pages of their newspaper?

I'm not saying sports are inherently evil, but they are the perfect springboard for advertisers and those who wish to distract the common man's attention from other, more important goings-on.

The Heritage Foundation last year quoted Baltimore Ravens owner Art Modell saying: "The pride and presence of a professional football team is far more important than 30 libraries, and I say that with all due respect to the learning process."

If we valued more humanistic endeavors and scrutinized our politicians the way we do athletes and superstars, this country would be much better off.

Contact the columnist at joebechard@dailyemerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Remember to question advertising, authority

Soon a new school year will begin for millions of children across America. They will ride along roads dedicated to Martin Luther King Jr. and go to schools named for him. Forty years ago in rural Louisiana, my school bus drove past a large billboard with his picture on it. However, it was not a tribute.

The billboard showed King sitting in a school classroom. At the top of the billboard, blazed in large red letters was "Mar-

tin Luther King in a Communist Training School." Our school bus passed that billboard every morning and afternoon for two years. Lots of my classmates and some of our teachers agreed with it.

Each day I studied the picture of King in that school. That billboard became my first lesson in political advertising and my first memory of questioning authority. I was about twelve years old, and I realized that there was nothing in the classroom that showed it was run by communists. There were no pictures of Marx or Lenin or Chairman Mao. The photo could have been taken in any schoolroom in the world.

Today, American students study the life of Martin Luther King. But forty years ago it was much different. The billboard of King taught me something valuable that I did not learn in the classroom: to question authority, especially its advertising. Many things have changed for the better over the last forty years, but we still need to question authority and political advertising. I think Dr. King would want us to do that.

Steve Williamson
assistant researcher
Center for Advanced Technology
in Education
College of Education