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Bill calls for e-book versions of textbooks

Requirement would halve student costs, House Dems say

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Saying it could save more than 50 percent on the cost of textbooks, some House Democrats want to give Ohio college students the chance to trade in their piles of expensive books for laptops or other electronic readers.

Supporters and the Ohio Board of Regents say the key to such a plan is convincing university faculty members that digital textbooks can work as well as the paper versions. Individual professors are responsible for choosing the textbooks used in their classes.

"A lot of it is awareness by our faculty of these additional formats and also awareness of the price of textbooks," said Matthew Smydo, legislative liaison for the board of regents, which is neutral on the plan. "We don't want to limit the options for our faculty. It's kind of a difficult balance - the academic freedom plus making sure they use the lowest-priced book possible."

Under the bill, the regents would have two years to require publishers to electronic versions of textbooks. Publishers also would be required to provide textbook formats for students with disabilities.

"Our bill will use technology and common sense to lower the cost of textbooks on Ohio's campuses," said Rep. Matt Lundy, D-Elyria, who is sponsoring the bill with Rep. Matt Patten, D-Strongsville. "We can't ask students and families to shoulder the unnecessary costs of excessive textbook prices."

Lundy said textbook costs increased an average of 6percent per year from 1986 to 2006 and have risen 10 percent a year since.

A handful of universities have been doing digital-textbook pilot programs.

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Lundy said students in a psychology course at Miami University paid \$45 for an e-book compared with \$100 for the textbook. A biology class at the University of Dayton paid \$65 for an e-book, compared with \$134 for a textbook.

By delaying the electronic-materials requirement for two years, "we'll be giving the publishers more than enough heads-up," Lundy said.

Both Lundy and Smydo said it's important that faculty members be made aware of the cost of the books they are requiring; the bill would require institutions to produce reports on textbook costs. Lundy said publishers have told him that professors often select the most expensive textbooks available.

The bill also would:

- Implement a bulk purchasing program for books used at several institutions.
- Prohibit textbook and material bundling, to avoid having students buy items they do not need.
- Require bookstores to pay at least 50 percent of the original price for books sold back by students.
- Prohibit professors from receiving any incentive for using particular textbooks, outside of royalties for writing them.

"One thing we have to work through is the issue of faculty learning to teach on this material, and students, quite frankly, learning how to learn on the material," Smydo said, noting potential issues with highlighting text and making notations. "As it becomes more used and more known, we can break through those barriers."

The regents already offer grants of up to \$10,000 for faculty members who cut the cost of academic materials, such as developing their own textbooks that are free to students.

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