

A Resolution of the Faculty Senate Supporting the Use of Digital or eTextbooks at Fairmont State University

BE IT ENACTED BY THE FACULTY SENATE THAT:

WHEREAS, the cost of a college textbook has increased by 73 percent since 2006 — or more than four times the rate of inflation — according to a report from the non-profit Student PIRGs (Public Interest Research Groups); and

WHEREAS, the average student budgets over \$1,200 on textbooks and supplies each year, according to the College Board; and

WHEREAS, this phenomenon has made acquisition of textbooks a prohibitive barrier to a substantial number (66%) of students (according to the Student PIRG report referenced above); and

WHEREAS, student success and retention are negatively impacted when a student is not able to purchase the textbook; and

WHEREAS, a basic tenet of academic freedom is that the faculty member should be the person who selects the books and other materials appropriate to his/her course; and

WHEREAS, students derive substantial cost savings through purchase of digital or eTextbooks; and

THEREFORE, be it resolved by majority vote of the Faculty Senate here gathered, that Fairmont State University should adopt the use of digital or e-textbooks in all courses; and

THEREFORE, be it further resolved that Faculty Senate will receive a report documenting the student cost savings and success metrics resulting from this resolution.

The 3 April 2018 email announcement from Dean Shields concerning a proposed move to using an all-digital format for Fairmont State courses has generated grave concerns among the faculty. We believe that this initiative and how it has been communicated are detrimental to Fairmont State on several grounds, to include negative repercussions for the following: teaching effectiveness and assessment of moving to a digital-only format; academic freedom and integrity; openness concerning decisions impacting how faculty perform their jobs; and freedom of association and communication among faculty.

The email directive distributed to the Deans states, "Faculty would not need to be 100% Cengage by the fall as long as they are 100% digital." We are not opposed to working on an initiative to ensure more course materials are available digitally for our students. However, a 100% mandate is unreasonable. The best book for the job does not always have a digital equivalent. This is especially true in specialty courses which often have few textbook options available.

Our concerns and suggestions are outlined below.

Problems with Digital Format and Technology

We have multiple concerns with a move to 100% digital. For the majority of classes students already have the option of purchasing digital copies of their texts online instead of purchasing a hardcopy version at the bookstore. It is our experience that ebooks are at times more expensive than a physical copy if the student orders online.

Cengage does not offer many of the specialized texts that Fairmont State uses for its courses.

In addition, initial research appears to question students' preference for digital over hardcopy texts (see <http://www.techtimes.com/articles/131055/20160205/more-than-90-percent-of-college-students-prefer-reading-paper-books-over-e-books.htm>).

Several courses are taught in a way that requires students to have hardcopy books, as some instructors require students to break into project groups during class. Simply reading an electronic version from one's cell phone does not suffice for completing these projects efficiently during limited classroom time.

Student access is another concern. Many of our students do not have appropriate electronic devices and lack stable internet connections at home. We recognize that these students would still have the option of buying physical copies of their books. However, the cost of these books could be on top of a subscription they cannot fully use. We need more information on the print rentals offered by Cengage to determine if that would counter the problem.

Many of our students like to keep their books after the semester ends. This is especially true for students who are planning to attend graduate school. This would not be possible with a subscription service.

Problems with Student Engagement with E-Books

Research has demonstrated that studying with a digital book is not as effective as hardcopy reading and writing. Learners recall less from screen studying and sleep patterns are negatively impacted. <http://www.businessinsider.com/students-learning-education-print-textbooks-screens-study-2017-10>

When asked what are these issues with digital textbooks some of the top concerns in nationwide polls highlight eye strain and distractions. These concerns are echoed by some of our own students, especially those with learning disabilities.

Impact on Assessment

A faculty member's selection of course texts is a critical component of providing undergraduates with an effective educational experience. As texts are central to the curriculum of most courses, they play a crucial role in determining course outcomes. External assessment of Fairmont State courses rigorously examines such outcomes.

Selection of texts based solely on their digital availability or, even worse, selection of texts based on their availability via a preferred vendor, skews a faculty member's ability to use texts to directly support course objectives and outcomes. This in turn affects assessments, which links curriculum to course objectives and consequently to course outcomes.

Limitation on Academic Freedom and Integrity

Instructors choose the curriculum according to which materials best support the projected outcomes of a given course – not which texts might or might not be available electronically. Fairmont State Faculty are subject-matter experts in their respective fields who determine which texts are most suitable for the demands of the courses they teach and their desired outcomes. They should not be constrained by what is offered digitally either in general or by a particular vendor. An addition to significantly reducing faculty's freedom of choice, this proposal essentially interferes with how faculty members perform their jobs.

Restrictions on Freedom of Communication

The 3 April 2018 email message stated, "Dr. Martin asked that we not discuss this outside our academic units." This statement places an unconscionable restriction on a key facet of academia, the freedom to communicate one's ideas. In addition to what an "academic unit" constitutes, it remains a mystery as to why the president issued what is effectively a gag order on the exchange of ideas. The attendant secrecy implies there is something to hide from someone. This is not a principle on which an institution of higher learning should operate.

Questions and Recommendations

We appreciate the effort to address the affordability of textbooks on our campus. We also appreciate the intent toward manifesting the equal-access-opportunity for course materials. However, as we have demonstrated we have multiple concerns with a move to 100% digital.

We request clarification to the following:

- Will there be exceptions to the 100% mandate when reasonable?
- Will the bookstore still carry a selection of non-digital books?
- How will the fee for the Cengage subscription work? Will students still be required to pay it even without any course material through Cengage?
- Is the intent to move to 100% Cengage?
- What was the selection process for Cengage as a preferred distributor?

The following recommendations are based on the proposal as we currently understand it. Our recommendations are as follows:

- We would like to see a plan that takes into consideration faculty and student feedback.
- As was previously stated a 100% mandate is unreasonable and does not take into account courses where digital equivalent texts are not available. We request that an alternate plan be developed that takes our concerns into consideration. With a concentrated effort we are certain that a plan can be developed to significantly decrease student costs that does not require going 100% digital.
- We question the value of committing to Cengage across the University. Our current adoption of Cengage books is low. The adoption of the Cengage Unlimited would have little benefit for our students.

Resolution to Express Support from the Fairmont State University Faculty for the Institution of Tenure

Whereas, the institution of tenure is essential to academic freedom;

Whereas, tenure ensures a healthy balance of governing power within higher learning institutions;

Whereas, tenure guarantees that faculty members who have proven their value to the institution and the profession cannot be arbitrarily fired;

Be it resolved, that the Faculty Senate of Fairmont State University strongly opposes any Board of Governors policies that weaken or remove the protections of tenure.