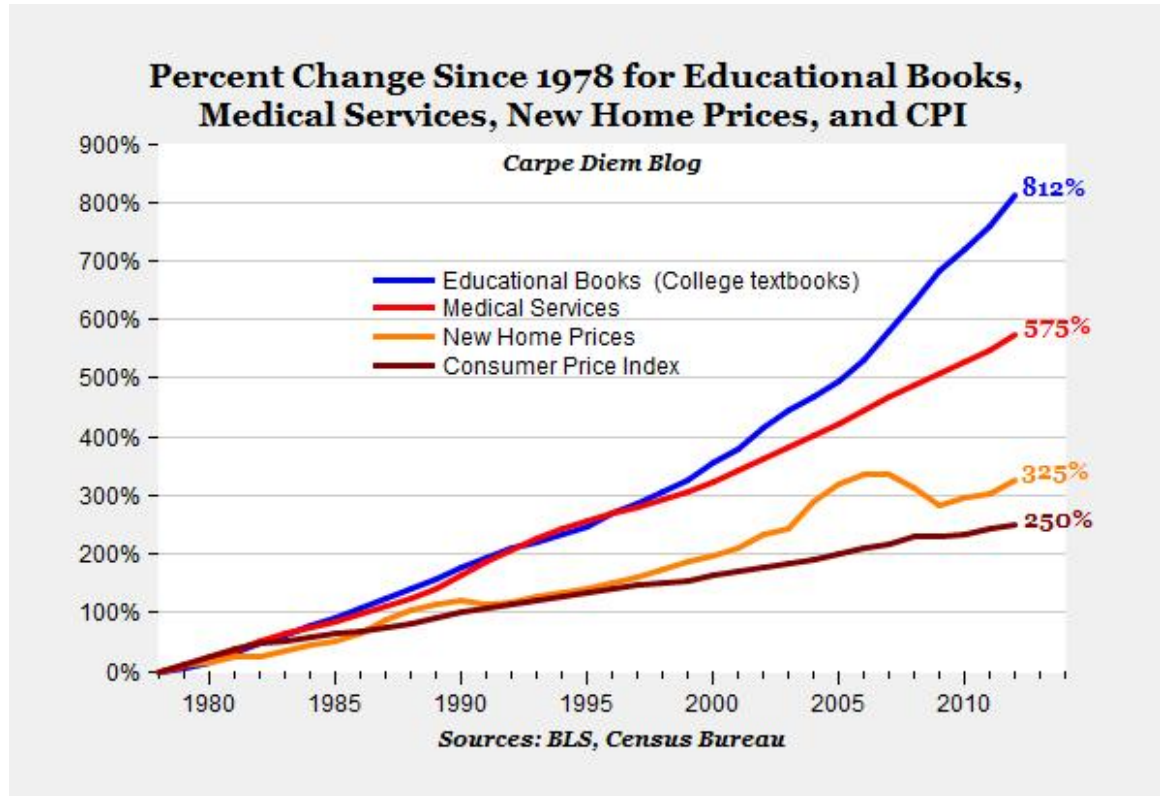


College Textbooks—Inexpensive or Free

Since 1980 the cost of college textbooks has risen 812%. Compare this to the consumer price index which rose 250%, new home prices up 312% and medical services up 575%.¹



It has been a race between the publishers' pursuit of high profits and the students' pursuit of low textbook prices. Publishers have increased their offerings to the professors who use their textbooks. These free "ancillaries" include such things as: test questions, lecture outlines, PowerPoint presentations and other useful tools for teaching. They also compete with each other for the lucrative textbook market with large and effective sales forces that visit every college. Each of these increases the cost of the basic textbook.

The students have countered with: sharing books, photocopying a text and selling the copies to other students at a great discount from the list price of the book.²

Students also generally sell back their textbooks at the end of the semester. The re-selling of books does not profit the original publisher, only the bookstore. The student can then never refer to the book that was sold back.

To counter the used book market many publishers sell non-bound printed texts, which cannot be sold as used texts to the bookstore. These are heavily discounted. They are also adding required electronic readings and tests which must be purchased by every student. These electronic supplements are usually included with the first purchase of the printed book..

Some publishers provide electronic tests and electronically grade the tests and send them to an electronic rollbook which the professor can use in determining the student's final marks.³ The big publishers are developing online supplements to textbooks, like Pearson's MyLab and Wiley's WileyPlus noted Nathan Schultz, Chief Content Officer for Chegg. But those platforms also focus on the needs of instructors,⁴ So the professor chooses the book that the students must buy. Cost is often no object for the instructor—the choice is determined by the ancillaries offered and the persistence of sales reps. College textbook sales are unique in that the decision for the product to buy is not made by the purchaser.

Students, states and universities object to the high prices of the textbooks but have been relatively powerless to choose an effective alternative. The professor is the object of the publishers' sales force.⁵

Philanthropic input

Rice University spearheaded a program to reduce costs for the thirty most popular undergraduate courses. The Gates Foundation and several other philanthropic groups have financed the effort. OpenStaxCollege provides free ebooks to students along with ancillaries such as the major publishers provide.]. They will also provide printed books for \$41. They now offer introductory textbooks in: physics, biology, sociology, anatomy-physiology, pre-calculus, psychology, US history, economics, macro economics, micro economics and statistics.⁶

Inexpensive Commercial Publishers

Flat World Knowledge began in 2007 with the mission to give free e-textbooks for reading on computers and e-readers but to charge for other apps like smartphones and tablets. It did not work as a profit making plan so in 2012 it began to charge for all.⁷ The charges generally are: \$24 for the basic ebook, \$39 for all apps for the ebook, \$59 for a black and white print book, and \$139 for a printed book in color.⁷

Total Health Publishing was developed by retired professors in the health education and sport. sciences field. The books are written by national and Olympic coaches and authorities in their fields. The e-textbooks range in price from \$9.95 to free.⁸

Open Textbooks

There has been a strong move to offer free open texts to college students. An open text allows an instructor to add or delete content from the provided e-book. California has funded such a program. Utah has followed. And the U.S. Congress has been considering funding such a program. The authors are usually paid for the license to use their books. Writing a textbook may take an author several years.

Boundless has a program that delivers low cost textbooks that can be edited by professors, as open texts or they can be used as a full text.⁹

Five other sources of open texts are: collegeopentextbooks.org, Merlot.com and oerconsortium.org along with the previously mentioned flatworldknowledge.com and openstaxcollege.org.

End Notes

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7. flatworldknowledge.com

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