

Local News

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Low-cost textbooks for college students make debut

The state community-college board is creating low-cost textbooks and course materials and distributing them online for free in a new program that rolled out Monday.

By Katherine Long

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Michael Kenyon's students at Green River Community College used to pay nearly \$200 for a new pre-calculus textbook. But this quarter, they'll pay only \$20 for a book — or use it online for free.

Kenyon, a math instructor, is one of the early adopters of the state's new Open Course Library, an effort pioneered by the state Board of Community and Technical Colleges to create low-cost textbooks and other course materials for students in Washington — and the world. On Monday, the state officially rolled out materials for 42 of the state's highest-enrolled community-college courses. An additional 39 courses will be finished by 2013.

"This program is truly something groundbreaking," said Nicole Allen, a textbook expert with Student Public Interest Research Groups, a national student-advocacy group. "Washington state has really stepped up as a leader."

The entire library, funded with state money and a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is free and available to anyone who wants to use it. Because they're digital and open-source, books and other course materials produced this way can be adapted, improved or updated on the fly to fit different classes. The state has contributed \$750,000 toward development of the library, and the Gates Foundation matched the money.

Kenyon's pre-calculus textbook was written by community-college faculty members David Lippman and Melonie Rasmussen, who teach at Pierce College Fort Steilacoom, in Lakewood.

"We looked at a lot of textbooks," Kenyon said. "There are some people who think this is the best book out there." A hard copy of the book can be ordered for \$20.

Tom Caswell, project lead for the Open Course Library, hopes less expensive textbooks, or free online copies, will lead to better course-completion rates. Textbooks are so expensive that cash-strapped students sometimes try to get by without buying some of them.

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All of the materials in the Open Course Library — including textbooks, syllabi, activities, readings and assessments — cost \$30 or less per course for hard copies. The state board says each course was developed and peer reviewed by a team of instructors, instructional designers and librarians.

Because the pre-calculus books are so cheap, Kenyon said, his students feel free to write notes in the margins and deconstruct them to suit their own study habits. Students would never write in an expensive textbook, he noted, because that would affect its resale value.

Some community-college professors have worried that open-source textbooks are lower quality than the books they've been selecting for years from textbook publishers. At least in the case of the pre-calculus book, though, Kenyon said the book has proved as good as the texts his students used to buy for \$200.

Allen said her group estimates that the 42 courses that have been developed so far will save students \$1.26 million during the 2011-2012 school year. And if all the state's community-college faculty adopted open-source texts, students could save as much as \$41 million a year. Using the course materials is optional — faculty members make the call on what to use in their classes.

Rep. Reuven Carlyle, D-Seattle, sponsored the legislation that set aside \$750,000 in state money for development of the Open Course Library, and he plans to introduce a similar measure in next year's legislative session to develop open-course books for K-12 classes, which would save school districts money.

"It really is the beginning of the end of closed, expensive, proprietary commercial textbooks that are completely disconnected from today's reality," Carlyle said. He said the state has a moral responsibility to address the "institutional bureaucracy of the status quo in the textbook world" because skyrocketing tuition is already stretching students' ability to pay for college.

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