

Aaron Lewis
Junior, University of Oregon

In my first term at the University of Oregon, I spent three hundred dollars on six separate books for classes. When the term was over, I had only read three of them. The rest were either provided for free by the professor or were eliminated from the syllabus altogether. When I registered, my advisors had urged me to buy my supplies ahead of time, to “be ready for the first day of class.” I eagerly did so, unaware that I was pouring my college savings fund down the drain. The next term, I wised up, waiting until the first day of class to buy books. I saved money, but this time, I was struck by unexpected costs—my Intro to Public Policy class required a \$200 textbook for which I had not budgeted. Neither the waiting strategy nor the planning strategy allowed me to effectively spend my money. In both cases, a nonsensical lack of information tacked hundreds of extra dollars onto my already mammoth tuition bill.

While I was fortunate enough to meet these costs with scholarship funds and family contributions, many students across the state cannot afford this lack of transparency. Outdated syllabi and unknown textbook costs constitute a barrier to equitable education. When low-income students have to choose between meals and textbooks, they will choose meals. The same goes for housing, tuition, and transportation costs; textbooks are the first to go for students on a tight budget. The failure of Oregon’s Universities and Community Colleges to publish course material costs exacerbates these inequalities. When students do not have adequate information, they cannot properly budget. They will continue taking—and struggling in—classes for which they cannot afford materials. Long-term, hidden textbook costs depress retention rates, harm academic performance, and reproduce the same class divisions that higher education aims to ameliorate.

We should not be asking students to make these choices. The proposed on-time adoption bill takes an important step toward equalizing higher education in Oregon. By requiring that course material costs be published at the time of registration, it will allow students to better plan financially, academically, and personally. HB 2919 finally holds Oregon Universities and Community Colleges responsible for the financial well-being of their students. By advertising course costs, it will also incentivize continued research and investment into affordable textbooks. As students embrace courses with low-cost materials, schools will see an increased demand for these classes. HB 2919 will spark a much-needed conversation between students, faculty, and administrations on the skyrocketing prices of textbooks and important low-cost alternatives.

I implore the committees to support HB 2919. It is past time that Oregon college students know the true cost of their education. Oregon law does not tolerate hidden fees for cars or other consumer goods; why should it tolerate these fees for higher education? HB 2919 is a common-sense approach to textbook affordability. It empowers students to make their own financial decisions and exercise control over their educational and occupational futures.