



National Association
of College Stores

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Talking Points: The 2007 ACSFA Textbook Affordability Study

Background:

The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (ACSFA) released a report on its year-long study of textbook affordability in June, titled “Turn the Page: Making College Textbooks More Affordable” (visit: www.ed.gov/ACSFA). The study was requested by Congress to identify best practices and innovations occurring in the states and on campuses aimed at reducing textbook costs, particularly for lower and middle income students.

An initial hearing was held Sept. 19, 2006, in Washington, D.C., at which NACS’ director of government relations testified, with field hearings in Chicago; Santa Clarita, CA; and Portland, OR. NACS was actively engaged at all points of the fact-finding and field hearing process, suggesting experts for the committee to interview and providing its Digital Content Strategist, Mark Nelson, Ph.D., MBA. In addition, NACS President William P. Simpson, president and general manager of the UConn Co-op, testified at a June 5 ACSFA meeting held shortly after the written report of the study’s findings were released. For a copy of Simpson’s testimony, visit: www.nacs.org/news/SimpsonTestimony.pdf.

Findings:

The ACSFA study found what it termed a **“broken” market** in the arena of college textbooks — defined by the report as a supply-driven, producer-centric market rather than demand-driven, consumer-centric.

It **identified eight “best practices”** that are currently being implemented in the states and on campuses, which it termed short-term solutions for today. These included: boosting the market for used textbooks, ensuring that textbook lists and the books’ identifying barcodes are posted online, creating local textbook lending libraries and rental programs, and improving financial aid available to students for textbook purchases through vouchers, credits, or loans.

The report also focuses on ways Congress can help make these options happen through partnerships and incentives for states and colleges.

The report **recommends against** any legislative or regulatory mandates. In fact, it said such steps would further damage the broken market.

However, the report identifies as its sole “long-term” solution to the textbook affordability problem the development of a **“national digital marketplace.”** This would be an Internet-

based group of textbook resources for students, professors, and publishers. Essentially, a central web site would offer a place to buy and sell books (physical and digital) at more affordable prices. As a starting point, the report points to the work already done by the California State University System.

NACS' Position on the ACSFA Report:

The ACSFA report does an admirable job of defining the issues involved in the pricing of college textbooks and identifying possible solutions. However, **NACS cautions against** the report's apparent focus on a "digital marketplace" as a single long-term solution.

While the digital marketplace concept proposed in the report is an interesting vision of what the future might look like in one aspect of a much larger, evolving world of higher education, it might be best to **allow the marketplace** to determine what makes the most sense for individual institutions and college students, including smaller colleges or students who might have less computer access.

The nature of individual colleges and universities and their student bodies are very diverse, making a single model challenging. An alternative, **more preferable approach** might be to take the best elements of emerging digitalization currently being developed and bring them to market at a lower cost tied to the best elements of local servicing. In addition, the benefits of any new model will remain unrealized unless faculty and students are trained in how to effectively use the new technology tools.

NACS also feels that many of the approaches the report characterized as short-term, "Today Solutions" also have critical long-term value. College bookstores are **actively engaged** across the country and at the campus level, supporting efforts to enhance affordable and equitable access to quality course materials and will continue to work as allies for student interests. For example:

- NACS and its members have long been the champions of students through ensuring a healthy used textbook market.
- NACS and its members promote savings through sales tax exemptions and tax credits for textbooks.
- NACS and its members work with faculty and educational departments to ensure the earliest and most accurate textbook adoption feasible.
- NACS and its members champion multi-year adoption of textbook editions to ensure a strong used-book market.
- NACS members are committed to running efficient operations that give students the most "bang" for their course material "buck."

What's Next?

The Advisory Committee's report will be added to the mix of the ongoing policy and legislative study and discussion regarding college affordability, and specifically course material affordability. Federal, state, and campus policymakers and the media are likely to review the report as well as the many state reports also on this topic.