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**UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA STUDENTS' UNION**  
SUBMISSION TO THE BOOKSTORE STRATEGIC PLAN

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# Preface

*For many, the university experience is characterized by three things: exams, books, and coffee. Despite the many changes to the university environment and business model, textbooks and other academic materials still remain a core component to an undergraduate education.*

The Bookstore and the Students' Union at the University of Alberta have a long and collegial history. The Bookstore's main location is housed within the Students' Union Building. They work cooperatively with SUBprint to sell custom courseware for students, which brings revenue back to the SU and the Bookstore. And as a sign of goodwill, the Bookstore has regularly been a major sponsor of SU-held events like Orientation.

Most importantly, the Bookstore has valued and sought student input in their strategic direction and operations. In 1996, the SU conducted extensive research on the rising costs of textbooks at the Bookstore. In 2001, the Provost and Vice-President (Academic) struck the Bookstore Advisory Group (BSAG) to engage students in a dialogue in response to concerns of increasing operating costs. In 2004, the Bookstore involved the SU in a thorough analysis of their business case. Despite a hiatus, the BSAG has resumed meeting since oversight of the Bookstore has transferred to the Dean of Students' portfolio.

In June 2012, the Director of the Bookstore indicated that a new strategic plan was in the process of development. The intent was to address concerns and operating deficiencies from the perspective of Bookstore employees, and then

seek feedback from different stakeholders on campus. The SU believes that the student voice is essential to this strategic plan, and that it should be based on both staff interests as well as key student priorities. We still hope to be included in a discussion on the Bookstore's strategic plan once we have more tangible information, and appreciate any opportunity to provide feedback from the perspective of the largest customer base of the Bookstore.

The data and recommendations presented below are based off of research of peer North American institutions, data from Students' Union surveys, qualitative studies and focus groups held at the University of Alberta, and studies commissioned by Students' Unions at other Universities. The quotes contained in this submission are from University of Alberta undergraduate students via surveys and focus groups. The recommendations below have been vetted by the Executive committee of the Students' Union, and we believe they are rooted in the best interests of the University and the Bookstore from the perspective of students.

We look forward to a continuing evidence-based conversation on the strategic plan of the Bookstore, and appreciate your consideration of our input.

## Focus 1: Course Material Ordering

### What Students Are Saying:

"Many textbooks I have purchased are hardly used except for assignments."

"It never enters my mind that I need to buy a recommended text."

"My profs told us not to buy the required textbook if we weren't struggling."

"My prof actually had the textbook reading listed for the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> editions. He said there was no point in buying the new edition if you had an old one."

“ Students are exceedingly less likely to believe instructors when they say a textbook is mandatory. In 2012, 24% of students waited a month after the first class to determine whether or not they should purchase their course material. This is a 6% increase from 2011.<sup>1</sup> ”

Fundamental to any business are its processes that determine which products will be sold. While many activities within the University of Alberta are decentralized, few compare to the course material ordering process. With nearly all responsibility to determine the appropriate course material placed on the instructor or course-coordinator, it's important that the Bookstore play a role in helping the instructor make the best decision. While we do not disagree that the instructor can make the best decision on what material is most suitable for their course, they may not necessarily have the expertise surrounding the practicalities and business processes of selling those materials.

First, language needs to be clarified on the difference between recommended and required materials. Instructors should be encouraged to reflect on exactly how necessary a material is to the success of their students in a particular class. Metrics, such as percent of the textbook they expect to be read, percentage of students they expect to purchase the material, or necessity for assessment activities should be used when communicating with instructors.

Secondly, whatever level of necessity that the instructors indicate to the bookstore should then be communicated clearly to students. If textbooks remain unsold, return shipping charges are passed on to students through textbook margins. Everyone ultimately benefits when the Bookstore, the instructor, and the students have a common understanding of the necessity of the textbook. The metrics used to describe whether the textbook is recommended or required should be included as part of the data available through BearTracks, and should be placed on the syllabus.

Unlike traditional economies, the course material market separates the decision maker and the purchaser into two people. If an instructor determines a

<sup>1</sup>National Association of College Stores

material is necessary, then the student is on the hook for the price tag—not the instructor. This asymmetric market discourages instructors from considering price when choosing course materials. Bookstore staff have estimated that up to 75% of instructors aren't aware of the price before placing an order for the material. In line with the Queen's University Bookstore, our Store should develop technical tools and allocate staff time in order to provide instructors with estimates of costs to students before they order materials.

Teaching staff should make informed decisions that reference both the price and quantity of textbooks ordered. While the Bookstore determines the best quantity of materials to order, as primary decision-makers, instructors should be provided with historic course registration and drop data from BearTracks, and historic textbook purchase data from the Bookstore. They should also be provided with a list of textbooks used for the course in previous years, which would allow the Store to sell old stock and to increase used book sales.

Sales of used textbooks at the Bookstore and at SUBtitles have dropped substantially. While this trend is likely to continue, every effort should be made to permit instructors and students to use old editions of materials, where appropriate. The course ordering form should include the option to communicate to students which editions of the book are appropriate. It should also provide instructors with information on materials used for that course in previous years and other sections.

The academic material ordering process should be habituated into the life of teaching staff. When an instructor orders materials later than 6 weeks before the start of classes, rush-shipping costs are directly added on to the cost for students. While the Students' Union understands that staffing decisions are complex, dependent on ever-changing enrolment figures, and vary by Department, every effort should be made to ensure that course materials are selected and ordered early. The Bookstore should increase communication with administrators when an instructor has not yet been assigned to a course, and should present at new staff orientation offered by the Centre for Teaching and Learning, Faculties, or Human Resources. Finally, to incentivize early orders, students should know when the price of textbooks includes preventable costs such as late orders leading to rush shipping, as administrative tasks associated with teaching and learning are part of what students should be able to evaluate.

“ *The American government requires publishers to disclose the unit cost of their textbooks to instructors when conducting a sale.* ”

“ *Queens, McMaster, University of British Columbia, and University of Manitoba all give instructors the explicit option to allow older editions, or to use materials used in previous courses.* ”

***Recommendations:***

- *Provide instructors with information on the cost of course materials before they place an order.*
- *Communicate the differences between recommended and required materials to students and instructors.*
- *Give instructors historical information on class enrolment and textbooks purchased for their course.*
- *Provide the option during the materials ordering process for instructors to allow the use of older editions.*
- *Discourage late orders through better communication with instructors, and identifying when course materials have rush shipping costs added on their sale price.*



## Focus 2: Non-Traditional Course Materials

### What Students Are Saying:

*"If I could buy a PDF copy of a textbook, I would pay money for that."*

*"I like coursepacks because you can take individual pages with you and they're pretty cheap."*

The course material market is rapidly evolving due to new technologies and the changing ownership of knowledge. Students expect that the services and products the Bookstore offer should be grounded in the technology of the day. However, regardless of the potential of new technologies or alternates to traditional course materials, they must only be adopted if they support student learning in valuable ways.

Based on the work of the TLAT eTextbook working group, the Bookstore should rapidly build the capacity to support electronic academic materials. Students now expect the ability to choose between print and electronic materials. While some prefer the portability, added features, searchability, and connectivity of eTexts, other prefer print texts as they are easier to read, can be marked up, are more reliable, and are less tied to distractions.<sup>3</sup> The Bookstore should give instructors the option to suggest an eTextbook in addition to their print materials, but should also endeavor to provide students with the option to purchase the equivalent online material for all ordered textbooks.

As a top 5 research-intensive university in Canada, undergraduates at the U of A expect to be exposed to cutting-edge ideas and research methods. In many cases, these can't be found in a traditional textbook, and instead selections of articles, writings, cases, or figures are the most appropriate teaching aid. The Bookstore should continue to support the development and sales of customized courseware, and provide instructors with the option to order a coursepack instead of a traditional textbook via the ordering process. Since coursepacks reduce shipping and handling costs to the Bookstore while providing support to student-owned businesses, we expect that the Bookstore would join us in encouraging coursepacks and not supporting the re-introduction of a 10-cent per page fee that makes coursepacks less affordable for students.

As a cost-recovery unit, the Bookstore does not exist to raise funds for the institution, but rather to provide materials that support in-class learning. Therefore, for students who are unable to afford new, print course materi-

“Students expect access to both print and electronic materials. But studies show that eTextbooks are preferred when there is a noticeable price difference from traditional textbooks.”<sup>2</sup>”

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<sup>2</sup>Daytona State College

<sup>3</sup>University of California Libraries

“*Cost is a clear barrier for students. 78% of students who aren’t able to purchase materials know that they will do worse in the class because of that.*”<sup>4</sup>

“*Bundled materials aren’t a clear benefit for students. Only 50% of students indicate that they use the additional materials often.*”<sup>5</sup>

als, the Bookstore should play a key role in facilitating access to alternate materials. Continuing to sell and buy-back used books, facilitating the sale of low-cost eTextbooks, providing access to free online materials, or linking students to textbook rental services are all alternatives to the standard sales model. Through its website, through information presented to staff during the ordering process, and through visual merchandising, the Bookstore should actively encourage students and staff to make use of alternatives.

While most assume ‘course materials’ refers only to textbooks, the Bookstore also sells lab equipment, artistic supplies, software, workbooks, solutions manuals, and online access codes. For students, these added costs can be burdensome and if not purchased, can hinder their participation in the course, or their final grade. The Bookstore should actively communicate with instructors to ensure that these peripheral materials have value for students, should encourage standardization of materials so that they can be used for more than one course, and should make clear to instructors the cost borne by students.

Increasingly, course materials are sold in bundles: a textbook with a workbook and solutions manual, or with an access code, for example. This is often a predatory practice of publishers; nearly 55% of bundled materials are not available unbundled to students. This reduces student choice, increases publisher revenue, and restricts the ability of students to sell back used books if access codes and workbooks aren’t sold separately for a reasonable price. The Bookstore should take a leadership role in discouraging bundling, by developing a policy that all bundled materials must be available for students to purchase separately. They could also include online process barriers and more information on costs when instructors consider ordering bundled materials.

**Recommendations:**

- ***Better communicate textbook alternatives to students and instructors***
- ***Always give the student the option to purchase the electronic version of the material, if available.***
- ***Continue to support low-cost courseware customized to the needs of the instructor***
- ***Ensure peripheral materials have lasting value for students***
- ***Develop policy to discourage bundling***

<sup>4</sup> US Public Interest Research Group

<sup>5</sup> California Public Interest Research Group

## Focus 3: Pricing and Efficiencies

### What Students Are Saying:

*"A required \$130 textbook was not referred to once in one of my classes. Shameful to think that a poor student trying to get a better education experience is losing money on textbooks."*

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As reiterated in a 1996 SU report, the 2004 business case analysis, the 2007 strategic plan, and the 2008 Be Booksmart campaign, students believe that the Bookstore is too high-priced. It's clear that costs need to be carefully controlled, course material sales need to be optimized, and that the mandate of the Bookstore needs to remain as cost-recovery.

Every effort should be made to accurately calculate the best amount of materials to purchase, as students should not be expected to pay for return shipping fees. The Bookstore should compile data on sales of course materials, and request data on course enrolment and withdrawal. Careful use of this data that accommodates for the number of withdrawals, analyzes trends by instructor, course, and textbook, and references different points in time will allow for the Bookstore to order a more accurate quantity of materials.

In 2012, the SU was informed that some units were selling academic materials as a source of revenue. The SU believes that course materials should support only the learning of the student, not administrative or teaching responsibilities of a department or faculty. The University should develop a comprehensive academic materials ordering policy that prohibits the sale of academic materials for profit in other administrative or academic units, that encourages early communication, and that discourages bundling. The Students' Union expects to be involved in this process.

Fundamentally, there needs to be incentives for the Bookstore to cut costs. Students should expect fairly priced course materials, and higher margins than online and brick-and-mortar retailers are driving the perception that the Bookstore is gouging students. Actualized margins need to be a key metric of the success of the Bookstore and its leadership, and should be communicated transparently at the Bookstore Advisory Group. While the Students' Union respects the internal operating processes of the Bookstore, transparency and shared data would allow us to provide student-centered feedback. The University is committed to engaging students in open discussions on major costs associated with being a student through committees like the Tuition, Man-

*“ 88.4% of University of Alberta students don't think course materials are reasonably priced.<sup>6</sup> ”*

*“ Cost is forefront in the minds of students. Nearly one-quarter of students carry a debt load of more than \$10,000.<sup>7</sup> ”*

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<sup>6</sup> 2010 Students' Union Survey

<sup>7</sup> 2010 Students' Union Survey

“*Expensive textbooks help nobody. Nearly 70% of students have chosen not to purchase a textbook due to cost,<sup>8</sup> and 23% frequently do so.<sup>9</sup>*”

datory Non-Instructional Fee, and Residence Budget Advisory Committees. The Bookstore Advisory Group should be structured similarly to these groups, with annual reporting, shared data, and frank discussion.

**Recommendations:**

- *Collect more data on student enrolment and course material adoption rates by course and instructor.*
- *Develop University policy restricting the sale of revenue-generating course materials by academic or administrative units.*
- *Promote a leaner Bookstore by using actualized course material margins as a key measure of success.*
- *Commit to maintaining an open dialogue with undergraduate students.*

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<sup>8</sup> US Public Interest Research Group

<sup>9</sup> Florida Distance Learning Consortium

## Focus 4: Student Experience and Communication

### What Students Are Saying:

*"The Bookstore price gouges students by selling books for above list price. When books are cheaper from Chapters, Amazon, and Barnes and Noble, even with shipping, something is horribly wrong."*

*"If the Bookstore wants to earn me back as a purchaser, they need to provide better service than piracy. iTunes and Steam have succeeded at beating music piracy and game piracy by providing good service."*

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Consumers increasingly prefer doing business from the luxury of their own homes. The Bookstore needs to adapt to the current generation of consumers by revamping their website to be reflective of their role on campus. Students should expect an easy-to-navigate site that connects them with their course materials, regardless of form. The Bookstore must communicate alternatives to purchasing new materials in a clear way to students and instructors. And it should ensure that the level of digital service matches or exceeds the quality that students can expect in-store.

As students become increasingly comfortable doing business online, cost savings on storage and staff time for online orders should be passed on to students. While the Bookstore isn't able to compete with retailers like Amazon or Indigo, it shouldn't neglect the digital world as a method for serving students and cutting costs.

Ultimately, students know students best. If the Bookstore increases its dialogue with the Students' Union, we will be better able to provide well-reasoned advice on the needs of its clientele. We hope that our recommendations are taken seriously, even if they are not all immediately adopted. We understand that we are not the best situated to recommend operational changes. However, based on the information available to us, and our knowledge of students, we believe these recommendations provide a clear foundation to develop a more student-friendly business, through open communication with the Bookstore Advisory Group.

***Recommendations:***

- *Prioritize the development of a student-friendly user interface for the Bookstore's website.*
- *Transfer cost-savings to students for academic materials purchased from the Bookstore's website by discounting online orders.*
- *Continue to engage stakeholders in information-driven conversations about the operations of the Bookstore through the Bookstore Advisory Group.*

## ***A Better Bookstore***

The University of Alberta is an excellent place for undergraduate students to grow and learn. The Bookstore provides campus with the materials that we need in order to do so. Despite a changing academic material environment, increasing competition from online and eTextbook retailers, and more vicious practices from publishers, the SU hopes that this submission will help chart a course that will allow the Bookstore to flourish.

We are hopeful that we will be included in discussions on your strategic plan in the near future, which will allow us to contextualize your operations with the needs of students.

Thank you for the opportunity to include a submission to your strategic plan.

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