Tales from the Canary

If higher education today is working in a mineshaft of change, campus stores and bookstores are the canary in that shaft. Although many may not see the world of textbooks as relevant on a grand scale, changes in this space—both in terms of technology and in terms of policy—foreshadow much of what is to come for higher education. What college stores need to communicate is that there is gas in the mine but that it is not yet fatal: there is time for fresh breezes to move through and ensure survival.

The Future of Course Materials and Content Delivery
One of the key areas of change is course materials. Although many institutions are focusing on e-textbooks—in the form of stand-alone .pdf/.epub equivalents of the print textbook—real changes are happening elsewhere. Course materials are quickly moving past the passive product of the past, toward interactive tools that demonstrate outcomes and content mastery.

Adaptive learning systems are the future course product. Increasingly interwoven with these systems are assessments, learning analytics, tutoring programs, and adaptive aids that will help each student reach his/her full potential. Like pharmaceutical drugs, these systems are designed and developed in order to demonstrate that using the tools results in enhanced learning outcomes. Already applied in emporium models, these tools target remediation requirements, helping students achieve the necessary levels of mastery at their own pace and signaling to instructors or others where various forms of intervention could be helpful.

At a policy level, competency-based education is being approved for institutions such as Southern New Hampshire University and its new College for America program (http://collegeforamerica.org/about). If these course materials can ultimately prove that they deliver on competency-based outcomes, the role of faculty and institutions could change. Beyond MOOCs, adaptive learning systems offer a potential for proven outcomes and scalability at a wholly different level.

The Future of Transparency and Analytics
Another trend affecting college stores is transparency, which began to influence college stores long before being felt in other areas of higher education. For stores, the issue is price transparency, which has led to data analytics initiatives at different levels. When the National Association of College Stores (NACS) tracked price transparency initiatives, we saw that college stores experienced an average 18.5 percent increase in market share. This happened because college stores are often the lowest-cost provider for course materials, despite public perception to the contrary. Many online comparison sites pull only a college store’s highest-price option and not its lower-priced substitutes, such as used, rental, digital, or other options.

At a policy level, college and university price transparency mandated through the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) is very likely to expand in the next reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA). What will happen when institutions must be far more transparent in their data on pricing, tuition discounting, and student performance? The same type of system that can now tell faculty members which students are reading the course materials and that can connect that information to student performance may soon also be able to tell an institution which faculty are more effective at helping students achieve content mastery. Data will project performance not only for students but also for faculty, departments, schools, and institutions.

In addition, policy changes could enable students to download all of their course-performance data via an educational “blue button” and then share that information with third-party companies. The companies could use the data to help students find resources, courses, or other products and services that might increase their success. However, such data also gives those companies a great deal of knowledge about the effectiveness of individual departments, courses, faculty, and/or institutions. The data could possibly be used against institutional and faculty academic freedom. For example, in 2012 a California legislative proposal would have required course material selections by faculty to be ranked on an affordability scale, with the data submitted to the state.

As transparency for textbook pricing expands to transparency for all higher education costs, are institutions ready to explain what their data looks like and why? From discount rates to the cost of delivering education, what does full transparency imply? Perhaps, as in the case of course materials and college stores, this change will be a positive development.

The Need for Collaboration
Business models in the college store industry are changing rapidly in the face of course materials disruption. There is more to watch beyond textbook rental and access codes, open edu-
By RICHARD HERSHMAN and MARK R. NELSON

Making the Mineshaft Safer Together

Communication between the college store and other campus entities must progress beyond contract exclusivity issues with lease companies. College stores have deep experience with course materials and should be included as key stakeholders in change initiatives. The target outcomes should include everyone working together so that the adoption process is handled correctly and no students are provided inaccurate information by the institution.

Directly involving the campus bookstore in conversations about course materials and content delivery will strengthen the success of pilots and experiments. Most stores have extensive data on adoptions and can help identify which faculty and which adoptions make the most sense for pilots. Stores can help identify faculty who have already adopted digital or are comfortable with digital options for students. If the goal is to push publishers into reducing net costs in exchange for more guaranteed sell-through, the campus store is also in the best position to identify which materials may yield the best outcomes in savings for students. Stores cannot provide that advice or other input if they are not included in the discussions about course materials.

Thus, just as miners safeguard their own health by keeping an eye on the health of their canaries, higher education should watch and learn from how college stores are adapting to the changing market for course materials and to other technology and policy developments. Doing so may just save an institution or two in the future.

Notes
1. California SB 1328 was withdrawn by the sponsor.

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