Publishers are agonistic about how they deliver their content, and printing is just one delivery method.

In 2007, higher-education publishers continued to grapple with price resistance to textbooks and competition from the used-book market. What is new is that they are finally making real progress in offering their wares in electronic format and moving to resolve the pricing dilemma, at least in part. While publishers know that critical mass with electronically delivered textbooks will not be attained in the near-term future, they moved closer to that goal last year. And all major publishers have made strides with their popular “born digital” supplemental and assessment programs, such as Pearson’s MyLab.com series and Wiley’s WileyPLUS.

With the cost of college said to be escalating at double the rate of inflation, parents and students have voiced frustration, some think unreasonably, about textbook prices. Public-interest research groups and advocacy groups such as the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (ACSF) has been conducting studies and publishing reports that spotlight what they deem excessive outlays on textbooks. And movements to spotlight what they deem excessive affordability issues have been conducted, some think unreasonably, by advisory committees on student financial aid, such as the Education Advisory Committee on Student Aid (EASA), which has been mandating that students use only digital books and supplied them with their entire curriculum on their first day.

“Everyone is searching for a silver bullet,” says Barbara Hildebrand, Association of American Publishers executive director for higher education, told a committee of the Colorado state legislature recently. “The problem is there is no silver bullet, and simply focusing on price is not a valid policy.” The solution lies in looking to the future rather than the past, he said. The future means the use of technology, and publishers, and to a lesser degree students and faculty, are realizing that textbooks are no longer a matter of paper and ink.

“Publishers are agonistic about how they deliver their content, and printing is just one delivery method,” said Ed Stanford, president of McGraw-Hill higher education, in a recent address to ACSFA.

E-Textbooks Inroads

The e-textbook game has been two years away for 10 years,” says Frank Lyman, president of CourseSmart, which makes textbooks from the six-largest college publishers available from one site in one format for about 35 percent of the price of a new print book. Course-Smart’s primary mission, Lyman says, is to create an online environment where faculty members can review textbooks for adoption. “Print review copies are a lot of clutter and environmental waste—out the most efficient way if you’re trying to make an intelligent decision about course materials,” he declares.

While studies have found that most college students prefer their textbooks in print rather than digital format, Lyman argues that digital is making inroads. “It’s a big business. A recent study by CourseSmart found that 10 percent of students who pulled choose a digital option. Saving money was part of the attraction, but about 45 percent said they were curious and wanted to try a digital book. And the search capability digital books afford also appeals to students.

Although e-books are now available in most areas of study, they have been used in certain disciplines for a long time, says Frank Daniel III of Ingram Digital. Through its VitalSource online e-textbook distribution system, a few publishers have been providing entire curricula in electronic format for about eight years. The first major distribution was to two dental schools—the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio and SUNY Buffalo—which mandated that students use only digital books and supplied them with their entire curriculum on their first day.

In addition to e-books, most large publishers have developed “born-digital” programs, such as WileyPLUS, which might be called supplemental but go well beyond that, enabling students to self-tune, work problems, and then self-assess their progress. These programs are particularly useful to students who need extra help in college, says Chris Ross, senior principal of the Parthenon Group, a Boston-based education consultancy. “Increasing numbers of students go through the high school system and come out unprepared for college,” he reports. “They end up in institutions, particularly the community colleges, that don’t necessarily have the resources to give them the attention they need to be successful. Therefore, from the permanent academic library, and add updates, annotations, and class notes.

Choice Matters

Fair pricing and added value are important issues for Brian6 & Sons, according to Bonnie Lieberman, senior vice president, higher education. “We support digital delivery of our products in many forms. Digital delivery costs less and therefore allows lower price points,” she says. “In addition to that, where there is instant feedback, there is also a three-hole punched, at a discount off the price text. Most of Wiley’s key titles are available in downloadable desktop editions through CourseSmart, at a discount off the print edition price.

Digital delivery means we must continue investing to deliver great content and great tools for course management, online instruction courses, and e-books as paper-based products are replaced by electronic products.”

“You must provide more functionality and features for picking a bound or loose-leaf textbook over an e-book,” says Ross, acknowledging that publishers have developed “born-digital” programs that most college publishers offer custom-designed course books. As McGraw-Hill’s Stanford points out, these allow instructors to select content and blend methods of delivery—print, digital, multimedia, and interactive—while moderating costs to students. And if the professor continues to order the same custom book, it can be resold on that campus.

The ongoing digital transformation means we must continue investing to deliver great content and great tools for course management, online instruction, and e-books as paper-based products are replaced by electronic products.

It’s And, Not Or

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But college publishers are not abandoning the print textbook anytime soon. While digital offerings are making strides, publishers are not inclined to see them as a panacea either for price resistance or for competition from the used-book market and the open-access movement.

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