

New initiative offers Florida college students free digital versions of pricey textbooks.

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University of Florida freshman Kelsey Viars, a graduate of East Bay High School in Hillsborough County, spent hours online this summer hunting for the cheapest textbooks for her fall classes. She ended up paying about \$200 total for used versions — less than many students pay, but still a tough bill to swallow on her tight budget.

"Bright Futures doesn't help pay for books anymore," said Viars, 18, who is studying criminology. "And I had to take out a loan as it is to help cover everything."

But through a new initiative state university system officials plan to announce today, Florida college students can get digital versions of some of those pricey textbooks for free. Students who really want a print version can order one custom-bound for between \$30 and \$50 — far cheaper than even many used textbooks.

The project, dubbed Orange Grove Texts *Plus*, is a partnership involving the University Press of Florida, the state university system's nonprofit publishing arm; the Virginia publisher Integrated Book Technology; and Orange Grove, the state's digital database of K-20 teaching material.

So far 124 titles covering a range of subject areas are available digitally, with more being added as scholarly authors sign on to the project. The goal: reduce college students' annual textbook tab, which can run in excess of \$1,200.

The move appeals not just to students' pocketbooks, but to their tech-savvy nature. They already listen to course lectures on iPods and use sites like Blackboard.com, where professors post practice quizzes and other course material. So why not textbooks, too?

"The concept of this is more important here than the number of volumes we have right now," Chancellor Frank Brogan said. "Over time we can get more and more authors and more and more publishers — and then that gives students a better menu to choose from."

The Orange Grove initiative comes as major textbook publishers are beginning to offer a significant portion of their books in digital form, even though e-textbooks still represent just a small portion of the \$7-billion-a-year industry's revenues.

CourseSmart, a spinoff company started by major textbook publishers, currently sells more than 7,300 titles that students can read on their computers or iPhones. And Amazon is supporting an e-textbook experiment with seven universities, including Princeton, to evaluate the use of e-textbooks.

In some cases, students can purchase, at a reduced cost, a digital version of the textbook material that expires after the semester ends. Other companies sell the books for free but try to make money off the supplemental materials like study guides.

Meredith Babb, director of the University Press, said the Orange Grove initiative emerged about nine months ago from a meeting with the state's distance learning consortium, which encourages the online delivery of courses, class material and textbooks.

She conceded that the success of Florida's digital textbook push will hinge in part on professors' willingness to put their work in free digital format and to use the online books for their courses.

"We're not under any illusion that all the professors in Florida are going to grab an Orange Grove textbook," Babb said. "But what we eventually hope to do is populate the Orange Grove with competitive, commercially available textbooks."

Textbooks can reap great profits for publishers and the professors who write popular, nationally circulated books. And in some cases, commercial textbook publishers have offered incentives to college instructors who require their books.

"The model has always been to throw a chunk of money at a professor to write a book that can be used nationally," said Babb. "What we are trying to do is turn the paradigm on its ear and say, it's not about a professor getting rich. It's about affordability for students."

For example, students through Orange Grove Texts Plus can now read online, download and print out *Elementary Calculus* by H. Jerome Keisler for free. Or they can order a copy of the 992-page book to be printed, bound, and shipped directly to their home for \$47.50 (plus shipping).

Amazon.com on Wednesday was selling a used version for \$199.

A recent federal study found textbook prices have risen at twice the rate of annual inflation in the past two decades. Dozens of states have considered or passed legislation to make textbooks more affordable.

With the ongoing recession, and as Florida tuition rises while scholarships like Bright Futures dwindle in value, college officials and lawmakers fear more than ever that textbooks will be a financial roadblock for some students.

According to a 2008 report, Florida students pay between \$117 and \$127 per class for textbooks. That adds up to more than \$1,200 a year for a full-time university student taking five classes per semester. That's about a quarter of the cost of the average annual tuition and fees for Florida university students.

"Relative to the cost of tuition and fees, that is a big expense for textbooks," said FSU professor Joseph Schlenoff, chairman of the chemistry department. "And our textbooks tend to be very expensive here in the sciences."

A 2008 law sponsored by Rep. Anitere Flores, R-Miami, requires colleges and universities to post lists of required textbooks one month or more before classes begin. The idea is to give students more time to hunt for bargains on sites like Amazon.com, eBay and half.com — discount sites where students sell their books once a class ends.

Viars, the UF freshman, said her friends found books that way. And after this semester, she'll use those sites to sell back the used books she bought this summer.

Meanwhile, the University Press of Florida is going back through its existing catalog of some 1,600 titles and contacting authors, hoping they will add their work to the free Orange Grove inventory.

"I equate this to alternative energy: Everyone knows there won't be just one source of alternative energy. There will be many," said Chancellor Brogan. "And there will be many ways to try and bring down the cost of textbooks. This is just one of them."

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