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# Keeping the College Bookstore Alive

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**By Kenya McCullum**

 Jul 3, 2013

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As the world of publishing rapidly evolves, college bookstores around the country are working to best respond to industry changes and stay in business. And college bookstores are no different. The high cost of college textbooks is nothing new, but what has changed over the years is how students can respond to it. With online retailers, [e-readers \(http://www.schools.com/visuals/rise-of-ereading.html\)](http://www.schools.com/visuals/rise-of-ereading.html), and [book lending outfits \(http://www.worldwidelearn.com/education-advisor/indepth/college-textbook-rental-programs.html\)](http://www.worldwidelearn.com/education-advisor/indepth/college-textbook-rental-programs.html), students now have a myriad of options that college students in the past could never even dream of enjoying.

But with these options come an important question: what can college bookstores do to survive?

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## Sweatshirts aren't enough

In a recent [blog post \(http://toekneesan.blogspot.com/2013/04/rethinking-college-bookstore.html?buffer\\_share=49efd&utm\\_source=buffer&utm\\_medium=twitter&utm\\_campaign=Buffer%253A%2520%2540PSUPress%2520on%2520twitter\)](http://toekneesan.blogspot.com/2013/04/rethinking-college-bookstore.html?buffer_share=49efd&utm_source=buffer&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=Buffer%253A%2520%2540PSUPress%2520on%2520twitter)

Tony Sanfilippo of Penn State University Press offers up a wish list that he thinks will help college bookstores weather the storm of change. In “Rethinking the College Bookstore,” Sanfilippo writes that this age-old institution needs to be revolutionized and streamlined. For one, he suggests that there’s no real need for college bookstores to carry school spirit items, so the sweatshirts, t-shirts, and other products that smell like team spirit could easily be moved elsewhere on campus.

“It doesn’t need to be a clothing outlet,” Sanfilippo explains. “Take the shirts and such out of the store and find a new home for it. It shouldn’t be difficult, there are probably already seven or fifteen or thirty other places on and near campus that can handle the distribution of officially licensed goods. Instead, let’s radically recommend that the bookstore handle what it says it does right in the name, books.”

Sanfilippo believes these books can best be handled by consolidating the bookstore with another staple of campus life that’s also in the book business — the school library. And by combining these two entities, colleges can offer the most relevant content to professors and students alike. In this scenario, professors would be able to browse textbooks at the library before deciding on whether or not to adopt them for their courses, and when a book has been chosen, students who don’t wish to

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purchase the textbook can easily borrow it.

Sanfilippo ends the post by acknowledging that his wish list will probably remain just that, as these changes are unlikely to come to fruition anytime soon. But what do those on the front lines of the college bookstore think about these ideas?

“I think it’s a very limited view of the college bookstore and what the college bookstore is for different constituents,” said Laura Warren, manager of the Oklahoma City University Campus Store. “A lot of it has to do with the size of your campus. For a big school, you might not need to carry apparel in your store, but for schools that don’t have big names, they don’t have Wal-Mart and Kmart carrying their collegiate merchandise.”

Similarly, Warren says that merging the college bookstore with the library would also cause problems on campus.

“There’s already such a misconception about what a bookstore is versus what a library is,” she said. “Merging two separate entities that have their totally different gods, if you will, would confuse the consumer even more. If you’re concerned about customer service in the way I’m concerned about customer service, you would be asking for more problems than you would be solving because you may end up with such an open and liberal policy that you wouldn’t be able to control expenses whatsoever.”

However, in some cases, a partnership between the college bookstore and the library can work. Sally Neist, manager of the bookstore at Oakton Community College, says that on her campus, the library and the bookstore have formed an alliance where the library obtains course book lists from the bookstore and shelves the books for students to use. Although students are not able to take the textbooks home, they are readily available at the library for anyone who needs to use them, which helps students save money.

“You could perceive that as the store losing money, but really, we’re not here for that,” Neist said. “We’re here to help the student succeed, and if this is a way to make that happen, it’s a good thing.”

## Addressing the Challenges College Bookstores Face

Sanfilippo’s visions may or may not come to pass, but college bookstores are still left with real problems that demand real solutions. Keeping textbooks affordable for students is always a concern. This is especially true for community college bookstores,

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according to Neist, since they service a student population that is so much different from what you find at traditional four-year colleges.

“Since we’re a community college, students are just starting out in a two-year program, and a lot of the textbooks they buy aren’t for a major,” she noted. “They’re buying a lot of general education textbooks, and for them to be so expensive is a really difficult thing for students and their families to take in and accept.”

Four-year schools are having an equally hard time trying to get their students to accept and understand the cost of textbooks — especially in those cases where a professor adopts an expensive textbook that is barely used in the course. Students become angry when they have to pay exorbitant prices for books that only end up being used as paperweights or doorstops — and it’s the campus bookstore they blame for it.

“That’s the biggest disconnect between the student, the faculty, and the bookstores,” Warren said. “All we do is sell the book. We don’t choose it, we don’t use it, we just order it, stock it and provide it to students. And yet, we’re perceived as the bad guy because you pay a lot of money for something that’s required and then because the professor doesn’t have you open it and use it in some way that you deem affects your learning outcomes, we’re seen as horrible.”

In response to this problem, Warren says, many college bookstore managers are attempting to open a dialogue with professors, so they understand how their choices really affect the students, as well as the bookstores. In some cases, Warren believes the solution may be to scrap textbooks all together in courses that can be taught without one, rather than forcing students to buy books that will only gather up dust in a dorm room.

## Can the College Bookstore Stay Relevant?

Just as retail bookstores are struggling to keep their customers, college bookstores must also determine ways to remain relevant despite changes in the book industry. Although the future of textbooks may be uncertain, the key to saving the college bookstore lies in its ability to give good customer service to students by selling products that make their lives easier.

“As much as you can be, you have to be all things to the students,” Neist said. “They have to know that you have snacks if they’re hungry, as well as the pen, pencil and notebook. We open our store before classes start, so if students have forgotten

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something, we have it available for them. You have to continue to look for different avenues that will keep students coming back to the store.”

#### About the Author:

*Kenya McCullum is a freelance writer based in California.*

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