

Revolutionary e-textbook program will enhance quality, increase affordability of higher education

by David Williams - Monday, October 19, 2009

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Students and faculty from the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh's College of Business will pioneer a new process for delivering textbook information electronically, potentially saving students hundreds of dollars each semester. While other textbook rental programs force faculty to compromise by sharing a single source, UW Oshkosh's solution will allow professors to create a textbook customized to individual courses and teaching styles.

"This highly innovative model has the potential to revolutionize how textbooks are delivered to students and could serve as a blueprint for the rest of the state and country," Chancellor Richard H. Wells said. "The project is especially heartening because it demonstrates faculty and students' commitment to working together to enhance the teaching process while, at the same time, making higher education more affordable."

UW Oshkosh professors will write and edit the content for the electronic textbooks — called e-texts. The ground-breaking project will be funded through a two-year \$295,706 grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), the proposal for which was jointly written by University students and faculty.

M. Ryan Haley, an associate professor of economics at UW Oshkosh, developed the paradigm of using a common text for a subject's core concepts that could be supplemented with sections written by individual instructors. He will apply the model to the College of Business's 200-level statistics course.

"There is roughly 80 percent overlap in concept coverage among statistics courses: the core concepts," Haley said. "Professors can customize their e-texts by incorporating other ideas and examples in the form of appendices written by themselves and their colleagues, thus accommodating individual teaching styles and cultivating interaction across inter-related disciplines."

Haley, who will serve as project manager, is confident that increasing the continuity in classes that address statistics — including economics, marketing and human resources courses — will result in better-prepared graduates. Because e-texts can be updated in a far more timely manner than traditional textbooks, up-to-date, real-world examples can be added to appendices at any time, a boon to students whose College of Business professors regularly collaborate with regional businesses through consulting and research.

An electronic format for textbooks also supports the University's dedication to adopting sustainable practices. For more information on UW Oshkosh's sustainability plan, visit www.uwosh.edu/sustainability.

While specific details about the e-texts' delivery platform have not yet been determined, UW Oshkosh students already are excited about the prospect saving money on textbooks, which average \$700 per year and can exceed \$1,400 annually for students in the colleges of Business and Nursing. A low-priced, print-on-demand option will be made available to students who prefer a hard copy to the online version.

“The Oshkosh Student Association (OSA) has been looking into reducing the cost of textbooks for the past three years,” said OSA Vice President Alex Abendschein, who worked with Haley on the grant proposal. “We looked at other bookstores throughout UW System, including traditional rental programs, but we wanted a more cost-effective method of offering textbooks on campus.”

The idea of e-texts appealed to Abendschein because the new format not only will reduce costs, but also improve student learning outcomes. At the same time, the project also serves as an opportunity for faculty development as well as increased collaboration among professors.

Professor Haley will write the core concept statistics chapters early next year and plans to use the e-text in fall 2010, with other professors starting in spring 2011. He expects that the core concept e-text paradigm can and will be expanded to other cornerstone subjects.