Thank you for the feedback on our recent issue of Acumen. Your comments were positive and consistent. You told us to be direct and “keep it simple.” You asked us to cut the glitz, reduce the number of pages, and get straight to the point. In keeping with your advice, in this issue, our point is simple—we need your textbook information by our adoption deadline so that we can have your course materials available when your students need them, and so we can buy back books from students at the end of each term. It is the key to good support for your courses and to saving money for students.

What is the “textbook cycle”? 

The attached graphic (below) illustrates the cyclical nature of the textbook ordering process. We ask for your adoption information about six weeks before the prior term ends, because when we know in advance the materials you will be using, it has a positive impact on everything that happens later.

• It gives us time to review all the orders to ensure that we fully understand which materials faculty want and to ensure that we can properly identify the ISBN and publisher or other source.

• It gives us time to search for used books on the national market and makes it possible for us to pay up to 50% of the purchase price to students for texts that have been readopted.

• It gives us time to communicate with you if there are problems, such as titles being out-of-stock, out-of-print or available in a new edition which you didn’t specify.

Textbook ordering cycle simplified:

1. Course materials are selected.
2. Adoption information is submitted to the bookstore.
4. Bookstore determines quantities and acquires inventory.
6. Unsold books are returned to vendors after midterms.

And the cycle begins again...
Our goal is simple: to have your books when you need them and to have enough of them to cover your enrollment. We receive many questions about the ordering cycle. Here are a few of your major concerns.

I send in my information on time and give you an estimated enrollment, yet you still run out of books. Why?

The number of texts ordered is based on your estimated enrollment, current enrollment information from the registrar, and the history of sales for the course in prior semesters. Our goal is to have books remaining for every course, and we budget for up to 20% of our inventory to be left over.

In any given course, however, it is possible for us to run out of books. Sometimes enrollment exceeds our estimates. Sometimes the publisher is out of stock or, in the case of bundles and custom texts, needs extra time to get reordered quantities to us. We have also found that students from other campuses may buy their books from us if their stores have run out. And sometimes we simply make mistakes. Any one of these issues can cause us to run out of inventory and create a problem for you and your class.

Why don’t you just order based on the estimated enrollment?

We do use estimated enrollment numbers, as well as sales history, in determining how many copies to order. However, there are many factors that can impact order quantities. Declining sell-through—that is, the number of books we order that actually sell—due to increased online competition has become a major factor in our decision making process. The increasing variety of course materials also impacts the ordering decision. For example, custom published materials usually enjoy higher sell-through. The age of the edition is also a consideration, since the longer an edition has been around, the more alternate sources students can find, such as buying or borrowing from a friend.

While we budget to have 20% of our book inventory left over, we try not to exceed that number because returns to publishers are expensive. It costs 10% to 15% of the cost of the book to return it to the publisher, more if the publisher charges restocking fees. When you add up labor, freight and associated paperwork processing costs, the average cost of returning a text that hasn’t sold is about $10 per book.

What do you do about it if you run out?

We try to determine how many students still need books and then order them immediately for next or second day air delivery. We realize that being without the required text is a serious issue for students and for you, and when that happens, we try to react immediately and get the books in as fast as possible.

What can I do to help avoid or solve problems?

If you know that sales or enrollment next term are likely to differ from past history, for example, because of the way you are going to use the text in class, please let us know as soon as possible—when you place your adoption, if you know at that time. Also, please respond as soon as possible when we contact you about a problem.

How are publisher availability issues resolved?

As soon as a publisher notifies us that a book is unavailable—out-of-stock, out-of-stock indefinitely or out-of-print—we first search the national wholesale market for new and/or used books to see if we can secure enough copies. If not, we will immediately contact you to discuss the situation so that you can make an alternative selection, if possible.

Why is there a March or April deadline for classes that don’t begin until late August or early September?

Having your texts on the buyback list is critical for us to keep costs down for students. We need to know which texts you will use in the fall far enough in advance to do the research and make sure those titles are on the buyback list. In addition, problems do arise. Books go out-of-print or out-of-stock and editions change. Some ISBNs are more difficult to verify now that there are so many bundles and ancillaries, and in general, we find that instructors are harder to reach over the summer.
Some students don’t sell their books back, so why is the early adoption deadline important?

Even if your students don’t sell their books, it gives us a chance to locate used copies from other sources. Industry research shows that nearly 80% of undergraduate students prefer to purchase used books—demand that far outstrips supply. The search for used books from textbook wholesalers begins months before the beginning of the term.

I’ve used the same text for the last three years. Can’t you assume I’m going to use it again?

It is important for us to have your confirmation, because courses change, and editions change frequently ... about 25% of basic texts change editions each year. However, you don’t have to wait until the adoption date to let us know; and if you are sure you are going to use the book every time the course is taught until it does change editions, we welcome knowing that in advance. We will probably still seek your confirmation each term, because we don’t want to risk a problem.

If an adoption is not sent in on time, will buyback prices be affected?

Yes, books that are readopted are bought back from students at 50% of the purchase price until we have as many copies as we think we’ll need; non-adopted books are bought back at up to 33% of the new book price, depending on national demand.

When will books for my classes be on the shelves?

Our goal is to have every book on our shelves no later than two weeks prior to the start of classes, earlier if possible.

What are my options for submitting adoptions?

We will accept your adoption information any way you choose to deliver it. Often department administrative assistants collect adoptions and submit them at one time. We understand and appreciate the workload of department administrative assistants; however, please encourage them to submit adoptions to us as they are received, so we can begin working on them at once. The earlier we have the information, the less likely we are to have problems and the more likely we are to find used books on the national market.

Please contact us should you need any information or clarification about how the adoption process works. Keeping the lines of communication open will benefit all of us.

What percentage of books is really bought back on this campus?

Of course it depends on the discipline and other factors, but in general, about half of the used books on our shelves were bought back from students on our campus. The rest were obtained from used book vendors.

Why do textbooks cost what they cost?

Briefly, textbooks require a larger investment to write, involve greater peer review, call for more comprehensive editing, and cost more to produce than general trade books. The textbook publisher’s development costs are substantial, as are the costs of illustration programs, color and durable bindings. Textbooks are usually produced in smaller print runs, eliminating economies of scale, and their edition life is increasingly limited. Finally, marketing costs for textbooks are significant and are a definite factor in textbook pricing. Examination copies are expensive, as are the test banks, ancillaries and faculty support materials that have increasingly become the norm in this market.

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Why shouldn’t I send my students to online sources so they can save money?

We are convinced that the best way for a student to save money is to buy a used book from our store and then sell that book back at the end of the term. The savings are substantial … up to 63% off the price of a text bought new and not sold back.

However, we are aware that some instructors tell students to buy from online bookstores. While this may save students some money, these sites may also create unintended problems.

Our research has shown that students usually end up buying from numerous individual suppliers who contract with an online store to sell their books. Consequently, service and order fulfillment time can be inconsistent, unpredictable and inaccurate. Refunds and exchanges can also be problematic.

The publisher’s sales rep who may have visited you, helped you select the materials for the course, and processed your requests for complimentary copies does not get credit for the books your students buy online or from other sources.

Finally, when business is directed away from our store, it is harder for us to meet our obligations to your campus, specifically the obligation to secure all the course materials adopted by all faculty, including foreign editions, association publications, small press titles, custom course packs and bundles. We don’t focus just on the large adoptions and ignore the more time-consuming, less lucrative titles, as online retailers often do. Our job is to acquire all required books, regardless of nature or origin, and we’ll do everything possible to have all of the materials required for every course, in the right quantities at the right time.

The bottom line for us, if you will, is that we need your adoptions on time so we can obtain the right books for the first day of classes, address problems in a timely fashion, pay students the best price for their used books, and provide the used books students expect and demand.