

Do You See What I See?

by Joe Hall

Valerie Wells' [10-Aug-08 news item](#) for *The Hattiesburg American* entitled "Fingers pointed as price of books continues to rise," and the related USMNEWS.net essay, [Textbook Bad Press](#), are already raising some eyebrows across the USM campus. As stated in an editorial in the [12-Aug-08 issue](#) of *The Hattiesburg American*, "[a] number of pernicious trends are at work to keep textbook[. . . prices] at almost ridiculous levels . . ." The editorial lists three of these trends, two of which are highlighted in the recent USMNEWS.net story linked above. These are (1) the frequent new editions, and (2) the increased use of customization. Regarding the latter form of perniciousness, the *THA*'s editor writes that "[i]n this nifty scheme, professors get to 'customize' the product - for example, with the university's logo or the professor's name and picture. Professors can add tailored chapters. Again, students cannot resell the customized package." *THA* doesn't hesitate to cut to the chase, as indicated by the subsequent passages: "Why select a customized book? Well, in some cases, publishers offer a kickback to the professor or department that chooses this vanity scheme."

The editor clearly makes use of Donna Davis' prior description of customization as a vanity practice. The editor also uses the term "kickback" to describe the financial incentives, which can be 15% of the book's purchase price, that accrue to the professor(s) who make the text assignments. As pointed out in Wells' original news report, one of those customized texts came from a textbook adoption committee in the CoB's marketing unit. Who was the chair of that committee? None other than former interim CoB dean Alvin Williams, who is now at the University of South Alabama. Though yesterday's USMNEWS.net essay didn't provide any data on how much Williams (or Williams & Co.) made from the practice of adopting customized texts, a practice that *THA* describes as "unethical," I am prepared to offer some possibilities for readers.

Let's take fall semester 2008's enrollment numbers as a guideline. There are currently 318 students enrolled in the CoB's principles of marketing (MKT 300) sections. As Wells reported, the price of the customized marketing text that Williams' committee adopted is \$140. At 15% per book, that's a potential

of \$21 per book facing Williams and/or Williams & Co. at the time of adoption. Apply that to 318 students and you have a total of \$6,678 in potential “kickbacks.” Across two semesters, fall and spring, you have a total of \$13,356. Throw in a summer, assuming one-half of fall 2008 enrollment, and you have a grand total of \$16,695 for the calendar year. And, all we’ve accounted for is MKT 300. According to the USM faculty Wells spoke to, customized texts are all over the USM campus.

These dollar figures are jaw-dropping. Recall that Williams took the interim dean’s position in April of 2007 only after the USM administration increased his salary by about \$45,000. And even after getting a boost in income to \$175,000 per year, while so many CoB faculty work for less than half of that amount, Williams piously directed (at a faculty meeting) CoB faculty to pull together during the AACSB 6th Year Review crisis, even if that meant teaching overload sections and not asking the CoB’s central administration for overload pay. All the while, USMNEWS.net was running stories indicating that members of Williams’ own administrative team, and their sycophants, were “volunteering” to teach overload sections at \$6,000 per pop, while dissenters who were involuntarily being assigned to them were simply being told to press on for the team. And all of this came only after two other CoB faculty meetings wherein Williams told CoBers that research was needed from them more than ever before, and that he (Williams) wanted CoBers to eat, drink and sleep AACSB assessment rubrics (during the crisis). With all of these things taking place over the past several months, just the perception that Williams may have profited from a customized textbook kickback program is enough to turn one’s stomach. And to hear Wells and *THA*’s editor tell it, we have a lot more to go on than simple perception.

Unlike myself, *THA*’s editor was “surprised” that USM interim assistant provost, Bill Powell (and the other unnamed USM faculty), could not or would not name names when it came time to answer Wells’ (*THA*’s) call for accountability. This is a tried-and-true practice, a USM “blue flu” of sorts. One only has to visit the [textbook costs thread](#) at the [USM Forum -- To build trust, a team and a campus -- Message Board](#) to see how USM faculty build a human wall to protect those among the faculty ranks who are engaging potentially untoward practices and programs. When Wells attempted to

gather information about the textbook controversy from faculty via the *USM Forum* message board, she was met by an unwillingness to provide additional details and to objections to her use of the term “kickback” to describe the potential 15% financial incentive. This situation is made worse by the fact that these same faculty will publicly decry, using *THA* if necessary, untoward practices at the central administration level of USM. This episode shows that when the tables are turned these same faculty develop a serious case of the “I don’t know anything about that . . . You’ll have to ask someone else . . . And, by the way . . .” fever.

Two newspaper articles, one newspaper editorial, an Internet essay and editorial, a message board thread and a letter to the newspaper editor later and we have a controversy over textbook adoption practices at USM that looks to be gaining some traction. USM may be able to keep interim assistant provost Powell out front on this one only so much longer. Then it may be time to call in new provost Robert Lyman. After that, president Martha Saunders is all that remains, and you can bet she’s hoping that the human (faculty) wall holds up under all of the pressure.