

Textbook Bad Press

CoB Once Again Finds Itself in Middle of an Ill-Timed Controversy

"Outraged yet resigned to the inevitable, [USM] students will shell out big bucks this week for textbooks that they probably can't sell back." With this quote, the higher education reporter for *The Hattiesburg American*, Valerie Wells, began her [10-Aug-08 article](#) entitled, "Fingers pointed as price of books continues to rise." According to Wells' article, textbook prices have risen "an average of 6 percent per year," and they "nearly tripled from December 1986 to December 2004."

Two of the culprits for the high and rising textbook prices, according to Wells' sources, are *frequent new editions* and *customization*. To tell this story, Wells makes use of the experiences of Luke Stinson, a 23 year old CoB student who purchased the 11th Edition of Philip Kotler and Gary Armstrong's *Principles of Marketing* text for a section of MKT 300 (Principles of Marketing). Stinson remembers paying about \$150 for this text. Stinson told Wells that when he finished the class, he tried to re-sell the book at USM's on-campus branch of Barnes & Noble, but was turned away because his marketing professor had chosen a customized version of the text, which Stinson had purchased.

According to publishers and bookstores, like USM's Barnes & Noble, if there are problems in the so-called textbook market like the one Stinson experienced, it is the fault of professors who choose the books that are required. In Stinson's case, an investigation by Wells revealed that a committee of marketing professors in the CoB chose the textbook for MKT 300 so that the same book would be used for each class. In Stinson's case, that text was a *customized version* of the Kotler-Armstrong text. According to Wells' investigation, former interim CoB dean, Alvin Williams, chaired the textbook committee that chose a customized edition of the Kotler-Armstrong text, which, according to textbooks.com, has a picture of the Aubrey K. Lucas Administration Building on the cover and currently sells for \$140 new, even though this particular text is now in its 12th Edition. A review of this site by reporters at USMNEWS.net [confirms](#) Wells' information. Wells attempted to contact Williams for an interview about the controversial practice of textbook customization, which Interim USM Assistant Provost, Bill Powell, indicated increases textbook costs. Unfortunately for *THA* readers, USM students and their parents, Williams, who now holds a faculty position at the University of South Alabama, did not return Wells' phone call.

To explain why the customization practice is so controversial, Wells turned to CoB MIS professor and Director of Graduate Programs, Donna Davis, who offered some comments that supplemented Powell's view of customization. According to Davis, when a book is customized it is more likely that one or two *unimportant* elements will be added to a textbook, which in some cases can become a *vanity* item. According to Wells' interview, "Davis remembers a pitch from a Pearson sales rep regarding a customized textbook for a different class. It would have a custom cover, a page from the syllabus and possibly a photo of the

professors. Otherwise, it would be the same textbook. But the customized edition would come with a special incentive." What would that "special incentive" be? According to Davis, the textbook publisher "would give 15 percent [of the sale] back to the faculty." This practice, according to Davis, is unethical, a view that led Davis to tell Wells that "[t]his is wrong." Because of that, Davis explained to Wells that her MIS committee did not opt for a customized text.

The Pearson Education representative interviewed by Wells, Wendy Speigel, flatly denied Davis' accusation, despite reports in *The Wall Street Journal* indicating that similar deals were made by Pearson with various faculty at Pennsylvania State University. Powell and "other professors and administrators at Southern Miss acknowledged the practice," but, according to Wells, they "would not identify any departments or faculty who receive incentives." They did admit to Wells, however, that "customized books are all over campus."

Because USM faculty and administrators were unwilling to fully cooperate with Wells' investigation, particularly Williams, it is not known how much money Williams and other marketing faculty received from the assignments of customized textbooks. What is known, however, is that customized books are not eligible for resale at the USM branch of Barnes & Noble. Thus, because the marketing faculty committee recently chose to assign the non-customized version of the 12th Edition of the Kotler-Armstrong text, fall 2008 MKT 300 students will have the opportunity for resale that was denied Stinson and his classmates by Williams' committee.

Of course, that is not to say that fall 2008 MKT 300 students will face a low-cost ride. According to Wells' investigation, the non-customized version of the Kotler-Armstrong text is priced by the USM Barnes & Noble at \$184 new, and at \$138 used. The set of alternatives to the USM B&N that was found by Wells is summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Prices of Kotler & Armstrong's *Principles of Marketing* (12th Edition)

Outlet	New Price	Used Price
USM Barnes & Noble	\$184.00	\$138.00
Campus Book Mart		\$117.00
amazon.com	\$142.66	\$ 73.99
bn.com	\$127.51	\$ 74.25
usedcollegetextbooks.com		\$105.99
biblio.com		\$ 63.99

Source: Wells (2008).

The numbers in Table 1 above are daunting. Even "well-meaning" professors, who may attempt to avoid prices such as those in Table 1 above, are not always successful. Davis told Wells that she (Davis) thinks of students when assigning textbooks, and that she (Davis) once selected an information systems text that was listed at \$50 in the publisher's wholesale catalog, presumably because it was "binder-punched." According to Wells, the book Davis chose from a wholesale catalog was ultimately sold in the USM Barnes & Noble store for \$90,

representing a mark-up of as much as \$40. Barnes & Noble representatives interviewed by Wells declined to provide fine details regarding the company's pricing practices. Sources contacted by USMNEWS.net could not offer any specific information about B&N pricing practices, but did ask whether or not the CoB still taught retailing, and whether Davis had ever completed a course (or courses) in it.

Clearly, USM's contract with Barnes & Noble is one that, as many predicted, has come at great cost to the reputation of the institution. One thing sources point out is that, at times when controversies arise and "spinning" the situation seems hopeless, USM seems willing to throw the CoB under the proverbial bus. This is likely, as they put it, because the CoB's reputation is already at such a low point that doing so comes at a lower cost to USM than would be the case by dragging other areas into the fray. Surely, with customized texts "all over campus," more reputable areas at USM are making use of them, as is the CoB. The photo accompanying Wells' recent report, which is inserted below, adds to this particular viewpoint.



Source: Wells (2008).

Still, this particular episode is an especially bad one for the CoB. The summer of 2008 has not been kind to the former Alvin Williams administration of the CoB, as a number of controversies have arisen that are tarnishing the organization. In this particular case, USMNEWS.net will be looking to discover how much money was earned by Williams and/or other marketing faculty through the assignment of customized textbooks in MKT 300, and perhaps in other MKT courses as well.