

Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

Responses to "To Teach Our Students to Read Better, Let's Start By Eliminating the Book Rental System," by Bruce Henderson and to "Teaching as Community Property," by Lee Shulman, 3/1/95

I strongly oppose the book rental plan for textbooks used in courses within a student's major or minor. Students need to begin acquiring a professional library, and faculty need maximum flexibility to make changes at any time to keep pace with their disciplines. We also need to be able to have more than a single text for some courses. Students may have less of a need to retain General Education texts, and if a compromise is needed it may be these texts which could continue to be provided on a rental basis.

John Moore, Communications and Theatre Arts

I find nothing to object to in what Bruce says about the effect of the book rental system on our students' learning, but my concerns with the rental system are more pragmatic. I spend an increasing amount of time helping students negotiate the process of applying to graduate schools. I am pleased that more and more of our students are interested in continuing their education because I think it speaks well of their academic experience here at Western. But I am concerned about the effect that renting textbooks has on what our students will not bring to their graduate studies, namely, a library. The faculty in sociology believe that this problem is serious enough that for students going on to graduate school we attempt to provide them with a basic library from our own collections of books. It is inconceivable that a sociology graduate student not own basic texts in statistics, research methods, and theory. While I applaud the generosity of my colleagues, this is not a great solution. Among other things, Bruce's point about how texts can be used rather than simply read is well taken. It would be far better for students to have access to the books that they had used in their classes. If our students are to succeed in graduate school, we need to be concerned about how well we equip them to do so.

Anthony Hickey, Dean, Research and Graduate Studies

I disagree with Bruce Henderson's opinion on eliminating our Book Rental System. First of all, buying textbooks would mean much greater expenses for students. Second, in other colleges that do not have the rental system students are still going to buy used books from people to reduce costs. These used books will be marked with highlighters and pens, probably more than the books in the rental system. Students might get the idea that no one would want to buy their books if they had too many marks in them. Students would tend to shy away from writing in their books and this would reduce their ability to comprehend what they are reading even more than if they had rented their books with writing and highlighting in them.

Sharon White, student, Business Law

The Book Rental System is also accompanied by a plethora of petty rules that are excessively dictatorial in terms of how we organize and offer our courses and curricula. I'm weary of nearly two decades of constant meddling in what books I can use, how many books I can use, and how often I must use them. This pernicious and persistent interference in my classroom goes beyond all reason. Scrap the system.

Jeff Neff, Geosciences and Anthropology

Let's Throw the Book at Them!

"What could be so wrong with a system that provides something as important as books?" That appears to be a very harmless, open-ended question. But the more appropriate question might be, "What is so right with a system that mandates the purchase of books?"

I applaud the desire to help WCU students strengthen their reading skills and gain a greater appreciation for books and reading; however, forcing them to purchase undergraduate textbooks isn't the panacea to those ends, nor is it a prerequisite step. On the contrary, requiring the purchase of textbooks could very well be a negative reinforcement toward those goals.

The Book Rental program isn't the culprit that fuels (1) democratic reading, (2) modified speed reading, (3) massed, not distributed, reading sessions, or (4) altered state of consciousness. "What does all this have to do with the rental system?" remains a pertinent question. The only explanation given was that others had read the book previously and the student would be "stuck with someone else's active processing." The reader is already "stuck" with someone else's active processing, namely, the author's. If we aren't teaching our students to read critically enough to digest, interpret, and arrive at their own conclusions, then a previously highlighted paragraph is the least of our concern.

"What could be so wrong with a system that provides something as important as books?" Simple. It doesn't address the issue or the need. If reading comprehension and techniques are lacking in our students, then get back to the basics. The general education program currently is being re-evaluated for fine tuning. In the Foundations areas, incorporate a reading and study techniques course to complement the writing, mathematics, oral communications, computer literacy, and leisure and fitness areas. Attack the root of the problem; don't destroy a petal.

Look through the eyes of the students and parents. Find ways to make college more affordable. We have enough people out there looking for ways to increase costs. The book rental program doesn't "devalue" reading or books. Likewise, forcing people to buy a book doesn't instill within them a love for reading or books. In fact, the negative reinforcement might carry a heavier price tag. If, several years down the line, the "treasures" of our graduates' personal libraries are their undergraduate textbooks, then we have failed in our quest to help instill the value of lifelong learning.

Phil Cauley, Admissions

I do not agree with Bruce Henderson's suggestion that textbooks are inherently "bland and superficial," but I wholeheartedly concur that Western's book rental system has negative implications for the intellectual and ethical development of students on this campus. By the use of highlighters, students at WCU assume ownership of textbooks that, in fact, DO NOT belong to them. The markers force subsequent students renting a book to wade through a veritable rainbow of color before arriving at the printed information. As faculty and staff, we have all seen examples of the wanton destruction of reference materials in Hunter library. If students appreciated the fact that books do indeed come dear in the form of dollars, perhaps they might be less inclined to view library materials as being their individual property as well. Students at schools with book purchase systems have the opportunity to sell a specific text if they still see no value in it at the end of a course. This practice reduces their expenses while hopefully encouraging them to treat every book they use more gently. By providing textbooks for courses in the students' major, the rental system leads students to view each course as a separate and complete entity rather than as an experience related to subsequent upper-division courses and professional life after graduation.

Joyce Baldwin, Human Environmental Sciences

Bruce's comments are on target, and I agree that now is the time to help students become better learners by abolishing the book rental plan.

There are other good reasons for eliminating book rental. I have just attended my first WCU Family Night, where students were told that college is really different from high school. At every other college I know of, one of the differences the students experience is the expectation to assume greater responsibility for their own learning, including (but not limited to) the purchase of their own learning tools. High schools provide books to their students; Western, by continuing this practice, sends all the wrong signals about the locus of responsibility for learning.

Giving students the textbook (and note that it must be a single text) for the course feeds their belief that that is the only book they need. In my field, writers need a small collection of volumes within easy reach. I have never met a writer or a journalist who didn't have a dictionary, a style book, a copy of Strunk or Zinsser or Fowler (or some combination of them), and an almanac, at least. Many of my students here don't seem to see the need for these. Since Western doesn't issue dictionaries or almanacs, they must not be very important.

Finally, a textbook-purchasing system allows faculty members the freedom they need to change textbooks on short notice. A two-year moratorium on change makes bureaucratic sense, of course, but it's pedagogic nonsense. Let me give a personal example. When I was hired last spring, I was under some pressure to hurry and choose textbooks for my fall courses. For one of them, a course I had never taught before, I made a mistake. I chose the sixth edition of a popular text after making only a cursory review of the content. It turned out to be a dreadful book, the kind you can't really assign in good conscience. Anywhere else, that would have been a one-semester mistake, quickly remedied. But under Western's book-rental system I am condemned to live with my error, and four semesters of students will suffer with me.

John Slater, Communications and Theatre Art

One of the advantages of age is that you become more aware of and more alert to the cycles of change because you have experienced them. For example, I was struck by the fact that the proposals in "Quotes" from Lee Schulman's latest article are remarkably similar to what was in place when I started teaching here at Western 29 years ago. Teaching was community property; it was disciplinary; and we would not have dreamed of trying to evaluate everyone with the same instrument. Everyone chose an evaluation which suited his/her discipline, his/her weaknesses and strengths, and his/her students best. We were constantly trying new techniques and sharing our successes and failures with each other, hoping we would get it right. Our goal was to provide the best education we could for the students, not to become model teachers who taught using model techniques. We were judged by how hard we worked and how well we did in the classroom. We had a good idea of how well we were doing because evaluation was a continuous process and because we listened to students rather than listening to experts. What caused the system to change was not an emphasis on research, but a push to make sure everyone got evaluated the same way and that the evaluation be used for everyone in tenure, promotion, and salary increases, etc. Once everyone used the same instrument, the only judgment to make was how well faculty members adapted their teaching to the evaluation. Then, many believed that the only important difference between faculty members was publication, and as usual most faculty members adjusted. It seems strange that we have expended all the time and effort we have to develop better methods and better evaluations, and the best that can now be suggested is a return to the past. I would be delighted if that occurred.

C. R. Lovin, History