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When can faculty require text books they have authored for a class?

As the American Association of University Professors notes, there is a long tradition of Professors assigning texts that they have authored. After all, they are often internationally recognized experts that are well positioned to elucidate the most recent scholarship in their field. Moreover, the AAUP committee on professional ethics reminds us that "The right of individual professors to select their own instructional materials, a right protected under principles of academic freedom, should be limited only by such considerations as quality, cost, availability, and the need for coordination with other instructors or courses." (1). At the same time, the AAUP recognizes professors can sometimes realize a profit from assigning students their own text books and, as such, there is a potential for abuse (1). Therefore, many universities require approval from the department Chair to use an instructor's authored text.

While the faculty manual at CSU encourages faculty to advance professional scholarship, including through textbook authorship (D.7.6), it does not require faculty to seek Chair approval when assigning their own text in a class. However, using one's own textbook is a potential conflict of interest that must be disclosed to the department chair (FM D.7.7.4) using the Role and Responsibility form before adaptation in a class. This disclosure protects the faculty member and university from abusing this privilege.

Disclosure of a potential COI is required because a faculty member may profit inappropriately when their own text is required for a class. Of course, profiting from using ones own textbook is NOT prohibited. The institution only becomes concerned when abuse of this potential is the driving force for assigning the text. While each circumstance is likely to be unique, a department Chair or Head may consider the following questions when a faculty member discloses he/she wishes to use his/her own book for a class. In addition to the questions below, the Chair/Head is encouraged to seek assistance of someone competent in the field to determine if the textbook choice is appropriate.

1. Is the faculty member a recognized expert/authority in the field?
2. Will the text be used heavily in class as opposed to just a small section?
3. Are new editions being required frequently (annually)? If so, are the new editions driven by updated content, or the desire to drive more purchases?
4. Are others using this text widely? Is the publisher well-known, was the text peer reviewed?
5. If not being used heavily in class, could the book be put on reserve instead of being required?

Answers to these questions should help the Chair determine the level of COI that may be in play and whether a management plan needs to be in place or, in rare occasions, that the text may not be used. The vast majority of cases are well justified (even with profit from royalty payments). However, as with all potential COIs, it is the university's responsibility to make sure textbook adaptation is driven by scholarly outcomes and student learning, not profit.

References

1. AAUP Association's Committee on Professional Ethics in November 2004.
<http://www.aaup.org/report/professors-assigning-their-own-texts-students>