

We Need Increased Transparency in order to Control Rising Costs of College -- September 2005

By: Delaware Congressman Mike Castle

As our students head back to colleges and universities throughout Delaware and the nation, it is important to address the dramatic increase in the cost of higher education in recent years. College tuition has risen more rapidly than household incomes over the past two decades, climbing a record 14 percent in 2003, continuing a trend of higher-education prices increasing faster than inflation. In addition to these mounting tuition and fees which are especially challenging for low and middle income families, the costs of college textbooks are just an added cost burden. Clearly, we must work to make college's costs more transparent and that includes examining why the cost of textbooks is so high, and what possible steps can be taken to ease the burden on students and families.

According to the National Association of College Stores (NACS), the wholesale price of college textbooks has increased 32.8 percent since 1998. As was discussed in a hearing of the Committee on Education and the Workforce that I participated in this past July, The California Student Public Interest Research Group (CALPIRG) higher education project found that student textbook expenses have increased by 24 percent since 1996-1997 and students will spend an average of \$898 per year on textbooks in 2003-2004, or almost 20 percent of the cost of in-state fees.

At our hearing, we discussed the issue of the high cost of textbooks on college campuses and the effect it has on a student's overall cost of higher education. We gathered with various witnesses including a bookstore manager, publisher, and a school store association representative to learn more about how textbooks are priced, what innovative ideas are occurring on campuses to help reduce the burden of high priced textbooks, and what impact high textbook prices have on the rising rates of higher education in the U.S. at this time. We discussed issues regarding cost inflation, new text book editions vs. old editions, using on-line and rental textbooks and their impact on education, how to increase the use of used books, how to increase the transparency in the materials decision making process and discrepancies of text book pricing in the U.S. and overseas.

Some first steps to provide relief to working families and college students may include publishers voluntarily producing more affordable, quality college textbooks; offering faculty and students the option to purchase college textbooks unbundled with extra material; providing faculty with additional information on the company's materials, their prices, intended length of time on the market and differences in academic content from previous textbook editions; and, faculty considering cost and availability of previous editions when choosing valuable textbooks for coursework.

While clearly the issue of increasing college costs cannot be resolved in one hearing, this did provide a platform for continued discussions regarding post secondary education. For students and families, these questions focus primarily on the affordability of a college education and whether their choice of institutions will be limited by price. Our committee will continue to investigate ways to increase transparency of college costs so more students can achieve their dream of a college education.