How the College Bookstore Lost its Groove

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The Educational Mission of the College Bookstore

American higher education institutions must pay special attention to the importance of a quality, mission-driven college bookstore that prioritizes student success over pure profit. These two goals are not oppositional—college bookstores rely on revenue to stay operational to provide students the services and resources conducive to their success (Angelo, 2021). But according to Laurie Martinez Massie, Public Affairs for the National Association of College Stores, college bookstores are called such because they “exist to support the educational mission of the colleges and universities they serve” (Kim, 2014, Question #3 section). The sale of course materials provides students with crucial learning tools meant to facilitate that mission, yet they are often hidden behind aisles of embroidered hoodies or “mom” and “dad” mugs. The problem is not this influx of non-educational material or branded merchandise. It lies with more college bookstores prioritizing profit over students, to the point where they no longer sell physical course materials (Anderson, 2016). Though many modern college bookstores are a prime example of this, they are more the targets of this shift in mission rather than the agent. Corporate America first began commercializing higher education through college athletics and continues in the competitive marketplace through college bookstores. For higher education institutions to mitigate the commercialization of higher education, the college bookstore must reorient itself back to a student-first approach.

To call the college bookstore a “college bookstore” is a bit deceptive as out of the 4,000 existing in the U.S (National Association of College Stores [NACS], 2020), only around 2,000 remain operated by institutions (Rosen, 2017). According to Robert Walton, CEO of the NACS, “leased stores may significantly outnumber indies [independent college bookstores] as early as 2025” (Rosen, 2017, para. 3). These college bookstores tend to be outsourced to private businesses, such as Follet Corporation or Barnes & Noble Education. Other college bookstores run by non-profit organizations such as the NACS, the Independent College Bookstore Association (ICBA), or entirely institutionally operated have omitted the word “book” from the name (Rosen, 2016). Examples of this can be seen from The LCC Lincoln Store at Southeast Community College to The Cornell Store at Cornell University (Independent College Bookstore Association [ICBA], n.db). Though the NACS and ICBA support a college bookstore’s institutional and educational goals to facilitate student success, they also refer to them as *campus stores* to more accurately account for their variety of services (ICBA, n.da; NACS, n.d). With the increasing digitization of education and partnerships with tech giants such as Amazon, some college bookstores have moved exclusively online (Rubin, 2016). The use of language is a powerful tool, and this rebranding reflects how higher education and outside organizations view the purpose of the college bookstore to serve consumers, not students. To understand the increasing commercialization of college bookstores, it is important to consider the transactional and social roles it assumed throughout its beginnings and expansion into the marketplace.

Three Centuries of the College Bookstore in the United States

The Moravian Book Shop, founded by members of the Bethlehem church in 1745 in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, is the oldest continuously operating bookstore in the United States, selling a "curated selection of books and iconic Moravian- and Bethlehem-themed gifts" (Moravian University, n.d). While the money was likely used to keep the church afloat rather than benefit stakeholders, it solidified the inherent transactional nature of the bookstore. In the 19^{th} century, the retail bookstore (precursor to the modern bookstore) emerged and attracted residents to explore a bustling metropolis and purchase products (Highland, 2016). With intentional efforts, the retail bookstore became a community space allowing for participation in social relationship building, intellectual pursuits, and access to the elites (Highland, 2016). This focus on community building is a niche some modern independent bookstores rely on to survive while directly competing with companies like Amazon (McDonough, 2017). Independent college bookstores also rely on their community on campus to sustain it and can use any additional income to fund the institution or funnel money into specific programs and scholarships that help students (Kim, 2014). This is in contrast to for-profit businesses managing college bookstores primarily to profit rather than benefit students. Their growth contributes to the dwindling number of independent college bookstores (Lederman, 2017), resulting in more institutions outsourcing to businesses. This mass outsourcing can potentially lead to the reality of a "quasi-monopoly campus bookstore" (LaFaive, 2000, p. 12), which will be mentioned later in the text.

Though the bookstore is more than 300 years old, the concept of a college bookstore selling course materials originated approximately 120 years ago at the University Book Store; it was the first college bookstore, opening at the University of Washington in Seattle (Macdonald, 2020). In contrast to privately owned bookstores, the University Book Store was founded and run by students for students who were dissatisfied with the "uncertain and inefficient service of the city bookstores" (Macdonald, 2020, para. 1). It officially opened in a small room on-campus in Denny Hall in January 1900, where it had no textbooks, no capital, and relied entirely on a credit system to trade for limited course materials (Macdonald, 2020). Though it had no benefactors, financially sound foundations, or goals of generating profits for its host institutions, the University Book Store quickly generated enough capital to expand and subsequently charge students for ever-expanding course materials. While the University Book Store operates on a transactional model, it remains relatively autonomous because its “[a]ccumulated cash from operations and mortgage loans have been its only source of capital to this day” (University Book Store, n.d, para. 2). And though it has since become a trust by handing ownership from the Student Assembly to a board of trustees and shareholders, it has not abandoned its student-first approach (University Book Store, n.d). The trust explicitly lists students as its beneficiaries, and nearly half the board of trustees is composed of student representatives (University Book Store, n.d). It continues the “original purposes in starting the store—serving the academic needs and saving money for [students] whenever possible” (University Book Store, n.d, para. 11).

The University Book Store serves as an example of how college bookstores could avoid commercialization, continue following their institution’s educational mission and student-first approach, and most impressively—generate a profit. To Associated Students of the University of Washington (ASUW) leaders in the 1920s, however, it seemed there was more to benefit from in athletics (Dorpat, 2001). Despite the organization’s name, the ASUW includes outside entities and enterprises in its administration—potentially including leaders without any affiliation with the University (University of Washington, n,d). The ASUW leaders focused on creating a sports pavilion over the proposed Student Union building where the University Book Store was to be transferred, forcing its relocation to an evicted pool hall off-campus (Dorpat, 2001). Despite the University Book Store continued financial success to this day, the University of Washington had bet on its potential financial success in athletics as a Division I institution and member of the Pac-12 Conference (Pac-12 Conference, n.d). This prioritization of athletics over educational missions reflects American higher education’s enduring investment in athletics.

Athletics and the Introduction of Branded Merchandise

While the focus on athletics seems economically sound with the millions of students and viewers with no academic ties watching in-person or televised broadcasts, very few institutions net any revenue (National Collegiate Association [NCAA], 2020). This is due to athletic departments being designated as non-profit entities, meaning they are tied to their institution, and their focus is not to generate profit (Dosh, 2017). According to Bok, “athletics, as practiced by most major universities, are the oldest form of commercialization in American higher education,” beginning with intercollegiate competitions between Harvard and Yale oarsmen in 1852 (2004, pg. 35). This aligned with the institutions’ goals to develop students holistically through participation in extracurricular activities but allowed for the commercialization of higher education. Though the rowing standoff was initially self-contained and included very few spectators (if any), the first intercollegiate sporting event had expanded in both in-person attendance and television broadcasts to see which institution won (Veneziano, n.d). This set the stage for future professional intercollegiate events to be publicized by sports media goliaths and consumed by millions while few institutions benefit financially (NCAA, 2020).

According to Edelman, athletic departments served as an "invaluable marketing opportunity" to have institutional branding broadcasted to millions that could attract prospective shareholders and the occasional student (2020, p. 3). This marketing opportunity brought athletic apparel companies to higher education, leading to agreements where their logos are advertised for free on uniforms in exchange for equipment and supplies (Bok, 2004). The money an athletically successful institution can receive is astonishing; according to Ken Sugiura (2017), Georgia Tech (top 47 in 2016-2017) received $2.1 million between 2016 and 2017 alone. Not all of that revenue is accessible as the amount a school receives is often split unequally between discretionary funds and capital earmarked explicitly for product allotment (Kleinman, 2019).

Despite the ludicrous benefits, it is important to keep in mind that most NCAA participants generate no revenue and often lose money (NCAA, 2020). Less academically successful schools can make no liquid money in apparel contracts, but they might still receive branded merchandise rights to purchase and sell (Brown, 2020). For all branded merchandise the institution sells under contract, apparel companies profit from 85%-90% of that revenue, leaving little income for the college bookstore (Kleinman, 2019). Apparel companies seek these binding contracts to monopolize an institution's merchandise and generate more revenue than what they spent on the licensing agreement (Kleinman, 2019). In addition, uniform advertisement on broadcasts increases the company's presence in the institution's community (Kleinman, 2019), allowing new and old consumers—students and their families—to purchase their merchandise.

These apparel contracts have made it more appealing for college bookstores to sell these products—a practice that continues today in the many aisles of branded merchandise. The issue is not that institutions can profit from the sale of non-educational merchandise. Some college bookstores (such as Montana State University) rely entirely on these sales as they purposely price their educational materials to break even and save students money (Angelo, 2021). The issue arises from an institution's tactics to receive this discretionary money and what they do to maintain it. Even if institutions are not contractually obliged to push branded merchandise onto students, having them near entrances and occupying many aisles does not contribute to their educational mission. And while the discretionary money undoubtedly benefits institutions, it can be impossible to trace spending due to "discrepancies in how universities report outside income and vague guidelines …" (Kish, 2013, para. 4). Research is limited on whether that money is funneled to scholarships and programs that benefit students or if college bookstores can even do so with low revenue. Higher education institutions leave merchandise for college bookstores to sell like retailers, where the definition of retail is "the sale of commodities or goods in small quantities to ultimate consumers" (Merriam-Webster, n.d). As stated earlier, college bookstores are designated to sell educational products meant to benefit students and their academic attainment, not to target consumers. Through athletic apparel companies and branded merchandise, higher education institutions seemingly bow to corporate America (Seybold, 2008), leaving college bookstores less choice on what they should sell.

Marketplace Competitiveness and some Unintended Effects of Commercialization

Despite the college bookstores' educational mission, their transactional nature means they are "professionally run retail operations" (Kim, 2014, Question #4 section) in the marketplace. College bookstores must juggle generating profit to "support operations, scholarships and other [campus wide] needs as well as drive down prices" for students (Editor, 2017, para. 3). They must also attract students to spend more on required course materials than before (NASC, 2020). Larger organizations like Follet Corporation and Barnes & Noble Education have the resources and partnerships with textbook publishers to provide better student deals (McKenzie, 2020). While lack of resources hurts the competitiveness of smaller, independent college bookstores, they can benefit from their niche of a community-oriented approach and greater student support (Ommen, 2015). They have more control over pricing if they rely on used textbooks and can potentially increase sales by having the store to reflect the culture of their community (Ommen, 2015). However, this may not be enough in the long term. Though only 7% of all college bookstores in 1982 were part of the private sector, that number has skyrocketed to 30% in 2000 and could increase in the coming years (LaFaive, 2000).

Individual college bookstores sometimes compete directly with each other, such as the University Book Store and the nearby, privately-owned Washington Bookstore (MacDonald, 2020). Despite selling what should be similar academic products of equal quality, the Washington Bookstore shut its doors within 50 years of being founded while the University Book Store still perseveres (Macdonald, 2020). While it likely benefited from a nearly 40-year head start, consumer tax exemptions likely contributed to its competitiveness and success (Fiore, 1996). According to Nicholas Fiore (1996), there are two main ways institutions benefit from tax exemption on products sold in college bookstores. The first is through selling substantially related products, such as any course material that either explicitly supports the "institution's education purpose [or] furthers the intellectual life of the campus community" (Fiore, 1996, para.

4). The second is through the “convenience exception… items low in cost and recurring in demand may be considered to be for the convenience of a school’s students, officers and employees” (Fiore, 1996, para. 5-6). This allows for tax exemption on the sale of branded merchandise and other noneducational products, a benefit that privately-owned college bookstores cannot have. In order to prevent institutions from abusing this advantage, they can funnel funds from noneducational products to students (Kim, 2014; Editor, 2017). These tax loopholes help institutions stay afloat and continue serving their students when they receive decreasing amounts of state and government allocations (Mitchell et al., 2019).

The increasing digitization means students can purchase cheaper course materials online, especially as more college bookstores partnering with Amazon only sell noneducational merchandise (Dollinger, 2016). Electronic course materials can be incredibly beneficial—they increase accessibility and convenience and are often cheaper (Douglas-Gabriel, 2018). But digitization also allows for unscrupulous practices from businesses attempting to eliminate competitors through their overwhelming resources. Textbook retailers Follet Corporation and Barnes & Nobles Education, along with other textbook publishers that control roughly 80% of the college course material market, were issued an antitrust lawsuit for their monopoly of online course materials (Leonard, 2020). By using their “Inclusive Access” program (para. 7), students are automatically billed for access to temporary online course materials that cannot be resold (McKenzie, 2020). Their tactics seem to be a way to compete with Amazon to sell the same materials at discounted rates (Leonard, 2020), but it all contributes to the commercialization of course materials. This impacts the bottom line of physical college bookstores as they rely on the sale of physical course materials, ultimately impacting students who have less control over their purchases. The profit-first approach of corporate America deviates from the educational mission and student-first method of the college bookstores, but digitization is not the enemy.

Electronic course materials are beneficial and can be separated from the for-profit agenda of private businesses. The Open Educational Resources Commons (OER) is an organization that gathers and shares a variety of free electronic course materials (such as curriculum and textbooks) without many of the ownership rights that limit availability (OER Commons, n.d). This drastically increases accessibility, both in acquiring the necessary materials and financially for lower-income students. Though the variety is limited, they are not contractually bound to what learning materials they could offer and the price point in the same way private college bookstores are (Becker, 2011). This limitation can extend to faculty who must base entire courses around limited educational materials, potentially stifling academic freedom and creativity (Seybold, 2008). OER can also pose these same limitations, but it can prevent all students—especially low-income students—from participating in the bookstore monopoly by not purchasing marked-up course materials (LaFaive, 2000). However, the reliability of OERs cuts into potential revenue for college bookstores and forces them to find other income-generating alternatives. While not a silver bullet for struggling college bookstores, the use of OERs and partnerships with college libraries for discounted textbooks or trade with other libraries can benefit both the college bookstore and the students they serve (Westervelt, 2014).

Empowering the College Bookstore and Recommendations

The college bookstore has democratized the ability for students to access and purchase the necessary course materials to succeed. But that often results through compromising its educational mission and student-first approach when private businesses incentivize institutions with greater profit margins. These two factors are not inherently detrimental to the college bookstore's values—as mentioned throughout the text, their ability to generate income and stay competitive is what helps themexist. The issue is that the discretionary money institutions gain is difficult to track or mostly funneled back into those private businesses (Kleinman, 2019). Either option results in profiting from college bookstores without considering their educational mission. Some significant disadvantages of independent college bookstores is their lack of sense of community, autonomy, financial stability, and involvement of institutional shareholders. These recommendations work to ameliorate these shortcomings rather than guarantee a financially successful independent college bookstore—much less one that breaks even. These recommendations are realistic and work to strengthen the foundations of the college bookstore by cooperating with institutional stakeholders to exercise its educational mission and student - first approach. These should contribute to a more stable college bookstore that could convince institutions not to hand over their operations to private businesses with their own agenda.

One major reason athletic apparel companies continue to have a significant presence in college bookstores is that their branded merchandise symbolizes community. College bookstores have difficulty eliciting a sense of community in students, especially when they can feel excluded due to expensive course materials or are wary of its similarities to for-profit retailers (Chan, 2020). Taking inspiration from Claire Ommen (2015) and the University Book Store (n.d), college bookstores should partner with students to include their input in what should be sold. According to Courtney Peters (2016), themed sales, open houses, rental programs, and anything that makes the college bookstore memorable can increase student traffic. That relationship might lead to greater financial stability and loyalty from students and help establish a community that supports their college bookstore to prevent the need for help from private businesses. The goal is not to net any revenue, but that money could be put into scholarships and other institutional programs that directly benefit students (Kim, 2014; Editor, 2017).

The increasing monopolization of college bookstores through private businesses means similarly binding contracts where only certain course materials can be sold at a predetermined price. Students are forced to pay, find alternatives, or risk their grades by not purchasing anything (McKenzie, 2018); faculty must structure courses to these predetermined materials as contracts might prevent other materials. This fragmentation hurts the institution and the college bookstore, so compromising on OER and other low-cost alternatives (used textbooks, rentals, and digital products) can unite stakeholders. While the college bookstore would lose revenue from sold course material (Westervelt, 2014), partnerships with other institutions or sharing libraries can help build social capital. By giving faculty members autonomy over selected course materials and students multiple ways to access them, more faculty members and students of all income levels can be empowered and contribute to the collective social capital. This financial sacrifice would reward the college bookstore with a partnership between various institutional stakeholders, allowing for a better bargaining tool when institutions consider outsourcing.

If outsourcing the college bookstore to a private business or athletic apparel company is inevitable, partnerships with institutional stakeholders can be a powerful bargaining tool. Constituent loyalty could translate to protests on behalf of the college bookstore, forcing the institution to consider contracts more carefully. Students and faculty gathered in protest of the privatization of the University of North Carolina (UNC) Chapel Hill college bookstore in November 2015 (“Protestors Object”, 2015). Protestors worried for the fate of student workers while UNC leadership realized declining sales meant decreased allocations for scholarships (University of North Carolina [UNC], n.d). Outsourcing to Barnes and Noble Education would provide revenue to fund the college bookstore’s educational mission (UNC, n.d), but UNC leadership needed to consider their community’s pleas. The deal came to pass, but with a contract requiring the hiring of student workers and an advisory board “consisting of students, faculty and staff,[*sic*] to provide input on store programs, merchandise, and services” (UNC, n.d). The involvement of institutional stakeholders contributed to a contract that benefits the community and a private college bookstore under constant monitoring.

Conclusion

Corporate America has contributed to the commercialization of higher education through the privatization of college bookstores by athletic apparel companies and private businesses. The decreasing number of independent college bookstores is a direct result of it, and it puts their educational mission and student-first approach in jeopardy. But independent college bookstores should not have to be outsourced and prioritize profit in order to succeed. Branded merchandise and marketplace competition have their place in the college bookstore—they financially benefit institutions and help prevent a bookstore monopolization. Even a greater reliance on electronic services can benefit students rather than alienate them. It all depends on how institutions implement these initiatives. Higher education institutions must have the courage to stand against corporate America so college bookstores can continue to prioritize students.

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