

On Professors Assigning Their Own Texts to Students (2004)

The following statement was approved for publication by the Association's Committee on Professional Ethics in November 2004. Comments are welcome and should be addressed to the Association's Washington office.

Professors have long assigned to their students works of which they were the author. The practice ranges from assigning commercially published textbooks they have written to having students buy a volume they have written and published or course packs made up of their own materials they have photocopied. Not only individual professors, but also academic departments and programs, sometimes prepare instructional materials, such as laboratory manuals, that are sold to students. Some professors place their works on electronic reserve, making them freely available to students.

None of these practices is by itself cause for concern. 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. Professors should assign readings that best meet the instructional goals of their courses, and they may well conclude that what they themselves have written on a subject best realizes that purpose. In some cases, indeed, students enroll in courses because of what they know about the professor from his or her writings, and because they hope to engage in discussion with the professor about those writings in the classroom. Because professors are encouraged to publish the results of their research, they should certainly be free to require their own students to read what they have written.

At the same time, however, students in a classroom can be a captive audience if they must purchase an assigned text that is not available either on library reserve or on a restricted Web site. Because professors sometimes realize profits from sales to their students (although, more often than not, the profits are trivial or nonexistent), professors may seem to be inappropriately enriching themselves at the expense of their students. To guard against this possibility, some colleges and universities have adopted policies meant to regulate the assignment of a professor's own works.¹

At Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, materials written by faculty members and intended for purchase by students may not be assigned unless their use is first approved by the appropriate departmental, collegiate, and university-level committees. Faculty members at the University of Minnesota cannot "personally profit from the assignment of materials" to students without authorization of the department chair. At Southern Utah University, a department chair and dean must approve the assignment of faculty-authored materials. Approval by a faculty committee is required at Cleveland State University. Faculty at North Dakota State University and the University of North Texas can assign their own works but are cautioned against retaining profits earned from sales to their students unless, as the North Dakota policy states, "the text has become independently accepted in the field."

A variant of these policies requires professors to choose between contributing to a scholarship or

library fund whatever profits are realized from the sale of materials to their own students, or having the materials reviewed by a department committee or chair. Another variant, perhaps unique, is the policy of the Department of Neurology at Case Western Reserve University. Students in the residency program are given faculty-authored textbooks free of charge.

Learned societies and professional organizations have likewise adopted policies to prevent professors from taking advantage of their students. The American Political Science Association, in its code of professional ethics, states that "teachers have an ethical obligation to choose materials for student use without respect to personal or collective gain." The American Sociological Association takes the same position: "sociologists make decisions concerning textbooks, course content, course requirements, and grading solely on the basis of educational criteria without regard to financial or other incentives." The AAUP, in its [Statement on Professional Ethics](#), has also addressed this matter, albeit indirectly. The statement calls upon faculty members to "avoid any exploitation" of students, from which it follows that professors should not take advantage of students by the authority inherent in the instructional role.²

None of these policies bars faculty members from assigning their own works to students. Rather, the policies seek to ensure that course-assignment decisions are not compromised by even the appearance of impropriety. In the implementation of these policies, however, it is equally necessary to ensure that procedures followed by colleges and universities to protect students do not impair the freedom of faculty members or their flexibility of choice in deciding what materials to assign their students. Professors, individually and collectively, have the primary responsibility for the teaching done at their institutions. Accordingly, their voice on matters having to do with the selection of course materials should be determinative.

Endnotes:

1. State conflict-of-interest laws that bar state employees from acting officially on matters in which they have a financial stake may also be relevant for professors at state institutions. [Back to text](#)
2. *Policy and Documents and Reports*, 9th ed. (Washington, D.C.: AAUP, 2001), 133-34. [Back to text](#)

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