Textbooks for Tightwads

As classes start, business students are in for a shock: Textbook prices are higher than ever. A word to the wise: It pays to shop around.

By Rachel Z. Arndt

Shopping for textbooks can be burdensome at best, painful at worst. And it's no different for business students. By the time students get to B-school, they're probably well-versed in the tricks of the textbook trade. They need to be, with some books required at top B-schools retailing for well over $200.

Although textbook shopping is as inevitable as picking classes or group projects, spending tons of money on books doesn't have to be part of the process. The catch is knowing what you're doing, which isn't as obvious as it sounds, even for students with top-of-the-line spreadsheet skills. Of course, you can still look for the least beat-up copy in the campus bookstore, but that should be just the beginning.

The Web is overflowing with sites claiming to offer the cheapest textbooks around. So, with book prices rising, the cost of higher education higher than ever, and a dreary economy to boot, it'll certainly pay off to spend some time shopping around. Publishers may be resourceful, but students are, too.

AN OLIGOPOLY

To say they have to be is an understatement. The General Accounting Office says textbook prices have increased at twice the rate of inflation since 1986. And today, students spend on average about $700 per year on required course materials, according to a 2008 survey by the National Association of College Stores (NACS).

Part of the problem is rising production costs, but the textbook market itself plays a role. The industry is an oligopoly, says James V. Koch, president of Old Dominion University, in a 2006 report by the U.S. Education Dept. Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance. According to Koch, five publishers—Thomson, Wiley, Houghton-Mifflin, Pearson, and The McGraw-Hill Companies (Businessweek's parent)—control the market, putting out about 80% of all college texts.

What's more, Koch says, the textbook market is unique. Unlike markets for most consumer products, where demand is generated by consumers themselves, textbook demand is created by another group: the faculty choosing texts for their classes. That makes it possible for publishers to introduce higher prices without much—if any—loss in revenue.

Publishers can also introduce "bundled" versions of books—books sealed with additional CD-ROMs or other materials—for higher prices. This means, even if just the book itself is required, students are stuck buying a more expensive version.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

But the situation for students isn't as dire as it sounds. First of all, as some economists point out, students are smart and know how to consume. Yes, textbooks are expensive. But they are expensive at list price—usually the highest price a student can find. The prices charged by most bookstores, online retailers, and even online trading posts are well under this publisher-set price.
As *BusinessWeek* found out, those retail prices can vary wildly, which is why it pays to shop around. One of the easiest and fastest ways to find the best prices is to use a site that aggregates prices from many retailers. Booksprice.com and allbookstores.com are good places to start. They both list prices from the most popular Web retailers, such as alibris.com, half.com, bookbyte.com, and even Amazon.com. If aggregated searches aren't turning up the results you want, you can go to individual retailers' sites. Make sure to know the edition, author, and publisher of the book you're looking for—some books, on topics such as microeconomics, share the same title for completely different products.

Expect some surprises. Sometimes a retailer will sell the new version of a textbook for much less than a used copy. Abebooks, for example, charges $69.99 for a new copy of Jonathan Berk's and Peter DeMarzo's *Corporate Finance* and $120.54 for a used one. It's unclear why this happens, but one possibility might be that the owners of the used books simply overpriced their product. Another possibility: the retailer is trying to unload a stash of new books before a new edition arrives, much like a new car dealer offering rock-bottom prices to clear the lot for new models.

**BUY VS. RENT**

In general, though, used copies of books are cheaper than new ones—sometimes a lot cheaper. In many cases, used prices are just a fraction of the list price and a substantial discount over the cost of a new book. In some cases, used textbooks can go for as little as $1.

Of course, buying isn't the only option. Chegg.com rents textbooks to students by the semester, as do campusbookrentals.com and bookrenter.com. Chegg's current incarnation (with a name that comes from the combination of "chicken" and "egg") was launched nationally in 2007 by Osman Rashid and Aayush Phumbhra, who experienced their own share of frustration with the amount they spent on textbooks while in school. Students save between 65% and 85% off list price, according to CEO Jim Safka, getting what he believes is the "best possible value." Chegg.com has a revenue-sharing agreement with McGraw-Hill, covering 25 titles.

"Rentals are good for certain students," says Charles Schmidt, director of public relations at NACS. Rented textbooks might be good, for instance, for students who otherwise wouldn't be able to afford the books at all, or for students taking required classes about material they'll never think about again.

Amid all the low-cost textbook options available to students, campus bookstores would seem to be at a disadvantage. But for many students they're still the default choice, owing to convenience, the in-store shopping experience, and a sense that by patronizing a campus store they're giving back to their school. That's not likely to change.

**GOVERNMENT SUPPORT**

Besides relying on their own initiative—a quality that should be in every business student's DNA—textbook shoppers can also look to support from the federal government. The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 requires publishers to disclose the wholesale prices of textbooks, content revisions made in new editions, and other information designed to make it easier for professors to choose the most budget-friendly books for their courses. It also calls for the unbundling of CD-ROMs and other materials, making it possible for students to purchase only the materials they need. Finally, it will require that colleges publish textbook requirements in course catalogs, giving students more time to find deals on the books they need.

Schmidt expects these changes to bring increased transparency to the faculty-publisher relationship. Already, some professors are trying to help students spend less by sticking with old editions or choosing unbundled books. They're also joining textbook advisory committees with students and administrators, Schmidt says, to make sure "everyone's on the same page."

*Rachel Z. Arndt is a reporter for BusinessWeek.*
Inventing a Better Burger

Think the hamburger can't be improved? Top chefs around the world now see the burger as the latest test of their culinary ingenuity

By David Kiley and Rachel Z. Arndt

Innovating on the familiar hamburger is no easy task. But a combination of recessionary times and perhaps fatigue with vertically stacked food, or that which is formed in metal rings before serving, has prompted chefs and restaurateurs to rethink, if not re-imagine, what a hamburger could be or should be.

Take Richard Blais, chef-owner of Flip in Atlanta, who has burgers on his menu ranging from $6.50 for a basic patty with onions, tomato, pickles, and lettuce to $35 for Japanese Kobe beef with seared foie gras and truffle oil. In between, he is offering burgers made with shrimp, lobster, smoked salmon, or even mushrooms (vegetarians like burgers, too—if they aren't made from anything that had a mother). But with a nod to the times, perhaps, he says his average ticket is around $12. And he has funding to open several more Flips around the Southeast.

Blais takes innovation seriously. A finalist on Bravo's Top Chef last season, Blais is a student of molecular gastronomy, cooking with nitrogen and the like. One of his beef burgers is cooked sous-vide, which is French for "under vacuum," and describes food that is cooked inside an airtight plastic bag over a long period at low temperatures. What Blaise brokers in is not so much hamburgers as proteins of any ilk stuck between two buns.

Indeed, the existence of a bun, rather than the existence of meat, is what seems to define a dish as a burger these days. The rest is up to the chef to decide. And the bun is at the core of how the burger was innovated in the first place. The story has been proffered that the true innovator of what we know as the burger today was Charlie Nagreen. The Horton (Wisc.) native claimed that in 1885, while a vendor at the Seymour Fair in Seymour, Wisc., he was selling meatballs in sauce, requiring a fork and plate. But they didn't move so well, the patrons not wild about having to eat with two hands while taking in the exhibits. So, Nagreen, the story goes, started offering the meatballs fl attened in a roll. He stuck by his story until his death in 1951.

A "HAMBURG-STYLE" SANDWICH

The word "hamburger" comes to us, though, from the late 18th century when harbor cities such as New York, Boston, and London began selling a minced steak that had been spiced and stretched with breadcrumbs as a binder, a recipe said to have started at food stands at the Hamburg, Germany, docks. So, signs went up at stands elsewhere offering meat or steak cooked in the "Hamburg style."

They may have European roots, but hamburgers have become a quintessentially American food. But that hasn't stopped overseas innovation. MOS Burger in Japan serves up a tempura burger made of scallops, shrimp, and squid. And in Australia, some restaurants offer burgers made from kangaroos. Because their methane emissions are much lower than those of cattle, kangaroos are the more environmentally friendly burger meat, some say.

Some places are sticking to the basics, though. Nagreen may have claimed he served the first hamburger, but Louis' Lunch in New Haven, Conn., begs to differ. The restaurant's hamburger is the same as it was in 1900: a patty topped with cheese, tomato, and onion served between two slices of white bread. Ketchup and mustard are still off-limits.
As hamburger has become the rage, from a resurgent McDonald's (MCD) business in the past twelve months to fine dining rooms in New York and Las Vegas, and a new string of burger restaurants from celebrity chef Bobby Flay, the conversation with chefs and eatery owners on the burger can get as messy as a Big Mac in the hands of a five-year-old. "The thing you have to realize is that chefs are usually burger fanatics," says Flay whose four Bobby's Burger Palaces opened this year in New York and New Jersey, with more on the way. "When we go out after a tough shift, we go for burgers, and so we have a lot of opinions about how to do it right."

KEEPPING IT SIMPLE
Flay, who just published *Bobby Flay's Burgers, Fries and Shakes* in April, says he has had the idea of a string of burger joints for 10 years. He believes the griddle is the right approach, so the hamburger cooks in its own juices. A dimple in the burger with your thumb also makes for a more evenly cooked burger. It gets flipped once and only once, and gets Kosher salt and pepper before cooking. No special cuts of meat either, says Flay: 100% certified Angus sirloin and chuck, with 20% fat content. At Blais' Flip, in contrast, the 5.5 oz. beef burgers are a blend of brisket, hangar steak, and short rib. The same blend is used at Laurent Tourondel's BLT Burger restaurants, where patrons build their own burgers with the toppings they want.

Five hundred miles to the west in Ann Arbor, Mich., though, chef Alex Young at Zingerman's Roadhouse cooks his burgers on a grill fueled with oak. And the wood comes through in the taste. He salts and peppers his meat the night before it goes into the grinder, which it does fresh every morning. And he uses a 3/16 inch grind, coarser than most. Young is persnickety about his meat and uses only beef from California's Niman Ranch. It is grass fed, finished for a short time on corn, and the steers are allowed to get older—15 to 24 months—than most big beef suppliers. But he is looking to use local Michigan grass fed beef in the next couple of years if he can nail down adequate supply.

Young says he toured dozens of so-called famous burger places before opening the Roadhouse a few years ago. To him, the innovation in the burger, if there is any, is in the core ingredients, and taking stuff away rather than piling it on. "I have an idea of serving a burger on a plate with nothing else, no bun and no condiments, but that may be a little extreme," he says.

Zingerman's has an advantage over many burger purveyors in that it is has total control over its own bun, as the Zingerman's group of businesses includes one of the most highly acclaimed bakeries in the country. After experimenting, Young settled on an onion roll. The texture, about halfway between a soft potato roll and a Kaiser roll, started out as a "New York" roll served at Zingerman's Deli with minced onion in the dough and a pocket of minced onion inside. He took out the pocket of onion and it has proved to be the perfect carrier for the $9.95 Roadhouse burger.

A TURN TO SLOWER FOOD
The push for better burgers with better ingredients no doubt stems from a backlash in recent years against fast food restaurants like McDonald's and Burger King (BKC) and their use of antibiotic-infused factory-farmed beef. McDonald's, which fries burgers, has always been at odds with Burger King, which flame-broils. And as most college kids know, White Castle, home of the steamed "slider" burger, is the ultimate downscale burger rush and the place you want at 4 a.m.

It could be that the embrace of the pricier burger these days is a reaction to the dumbing down of the burger at fast-fooderies to an almost tasteless jumble of fat, salt, and sweeteners, which, while seducing our baser taste buds going down, leaves an aftertaste that's indistinguishable from that of the milkshake we drank alongside it. Add to that the desire for comfort food in difficult times, and the $100 dinner check going out of fashion in favor of the $20 check for two, and a trend is born.

It's worth remembering that McDonald's founder Ray Kroc was an innovator more of distribution and mass production than the food itself. The magic of McDonald's dating back to it beginning was its low-cost, mass
production, so that the experience was the same coast to coast, and of course the ubiquity of the restaurants. Kroc was the Henry Ford of food.

While the hamburger might seem to some to be as American as gun racks and apple pie, it's good to remember the name is European derived. And European and Euro-influenced chefs have been tinkering with burgers of late. Of course, it was when French-born Daniel Boulud stuffed truffles and foie gras into a ground sirloin burger at his DB Bistro Moderne a few years ago that the upper crust restaurants began tinkering with burgers in the first place. Recently, Boulud, like a French aristocrat who falls in love with an old Ford pickup truck, opened DBGB Kitchen & Bar on the Bowery in Manhattan with more burger offerings and a lower-priced menu than his Michelin-rated restaurant.

**EATING WITH A FORK**

Boulud's infatuation with the burger caused bistro's in Paris, no less, to start adding burgers to their menus in the past two years. Even the most recalcitrant French bureaucrats today can be seen using knives and forks on hamburgers, dipping forkfuls (yikes, use your hands, man!) into dainty porcelain crocks of ketchup.

Can the French really be influencing the U.S. hamburger? Could it be retribution for some Americans campaigning to rename deep-fried potato strips "Freedom Fries" when the French government wouldn't support the war in Iraq? The very American fast-food chain Hardee's is now launching the French Dip Thickburger, what it calls in its promotional material "a perfect 'pas de deux' of beef: a 100% Black Angus Beef Thickburger patty topped with thinly sliced roast beef and melting Swiss cheese served with a cup of au jus for dipping." To market the new burger, four "gorgeous Hardee's French Maids," (Sophie, Antoinette, Gabrielle, and Isabelle) will cruise the country on Segways, hitting 11 markets in the South and Midwest.

That's a bit too much for Michael Psilakis, an American of Greek descent, who now operates four restaurants in Manhattan, including the new Gus & Gabriel, which has six burgers on the menu. Psilakis, who has received top honors from both *Gourmet* and *Esquire*, focused more on the ingredients of a burger that would be familiar and comforting, rather than reinventing the experience. Starting at $11.50 and going up to $14, the craziest G&G gets with a burger is adding garlic confit or Gruyere cheese. Psilakis, who has an elaborate lamb burger cut with chuck and fatback on the menu at his fine dining restaurant Anthos in Midtown Manhattan, said he experimented a lot with new burger ideas before going back to basics.

"When we were working out the menu, I felt some personal challenge to really make a new statement in burgers," says Psilakis. His team experimented with aged beef, adding pork fat, duck fat, and all sorts of other haute innovations, such as braising rib meat before it went into the burger. In the end, he decided a burger made from chuck, brisket, and short rib meat and grilled over a wood fire was unbeatable. The fact that every ingredient is fresh—nothing from a can in the restaurant—was a good starting point for him. Then he focused on treating the bun with great care to provide some of the point of difference from other restaurants. Some of his burger buns, for example, are buttered with his own compound butter recipe made with pecorino cheese, caramelized onion, and a few other carefully chosen ingredients and heated up so the mixture penetrates the bread.

Psilakis majored in business in college and never attended culinary school. And he has opened two new restaurants since the recession set in, both focusing on menus where a diner can easily walk out with a dinner check under $20. Being innovative with something as basic and familiar to the U.S. and to the palate is defined, he says, "by making sure you exceed all expectations on what it tastes like no matter what you choose to put in or on the burger or on the plate."

[Click here to see the world's most original burgers.]

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For MBAs, a Post-Crisis Curriculum

When B-school students arrive on campus this year, they'll find new classes and new programs—all pegged to the global meltdown

By Rachel Z. Arndt

More than a year into the greatest economic upheaval since the Great Depression, the world is a changed place. Millions of jobs have disappeared, many of them never to return. Trillions of dollars in shareholder wealth have gone up in smoke. And the business world is struggling to come to grips with a radically new economic climate where risk is, well, a four-letter word.

When business school students return to class next month, they'll find their academic world a changed place, too. There will be new classes for some—classes designed to give MBA students an understanding of the crisis and its causes. Existing courses in risk management, macroeconomics, and other crisis-related topics will be far more popular than they ever were. Ethics will play a bigger role than it did just a year ago. And in a few cases, entirely new programs will spring to life.

To be sure, some of the changes were in the works long before the first stress fractures appeared and the economy began to crumble. And individually few of them will make headlines. But collectively they amount to the beginning of what may be the most significant rethinking of the B-school curriculum since the spate of curriculum overhauls that followed the collapse of Enron.

CATALYST FOR CHANGE

The B-school response to the economic crisis is as varied as the schools themselves. For many, the financial crisis is serving as a catalyst for self-examination. These schools are using it as an opportunity to tweak, and augment, both curricular and extracurricular offerings.

Although ethics has always been a part of curriculum at Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management (MIT Sloan Full-Time MBA Profile), it may soon gain a larger presence. The school is testing what it calls an "ethics module"—not an entire class, but a synthesis of the ethics taught in other business classes. The sessions are currently optional, but may soon become required, says Deputy Dean JoAnne Yates. Likewise, at Dartmouth, the Tuck School of Business (Tuck Full-Time MBA Profile) will add a required ethics and social responsibility class this fall, though the course was in the works before the crisis struck. This year's incoming class will also have to take a leadership course.

Faculty at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business (Chicago Booth Full-Time MBA Profile) are taking a different approach. In addition to a new course on ethics and several others, they're tackling the crisis head-on, introducing an in-depth analysis of financial crises—past and present—in a new class for the upcoming academic year, "The Analytics of Financial Crises." Some classes will be getting new teachers, too. When the new academic year starts, Randall Kroszner will take over for Phillip Swagel, former Assistant Treasury Secretary, in teaching Booth's "Money and Banking" class. Kroszner's qualifications for the bringing the crisis to life in the classroom are impeccable. As a member of the Council of Economic Advisers under President Bush, he helped formulate the policy response to the post-Enron governance scandals, and as a Fed governor until January he chaired a committee on banking regulation and helped develop the policy response to the current crisis.
QUICK OFF THE MARK

Like Booth, the University of Maryland's Smith School of Business (Maryland Full-Time MBA Profile) is also revamping some classes to better suit today's economy. It's shifting the focus of "Bank Management & Regulation," a popular elective, to place more emphasis on regulation and risk management. The school will also add a class on quantitative investment strategies that will look into "some of the more nuanced issues of risk management in large investment portfolios," says Alex Triantis, chair of the finance department at Smith.

When the financial crisis hit, and as it unfolded, B-schools were quick to react, incorporating lessons from the mortgage bubble, credit crisis, and other aspects of the crisis directly into coursework and lectures. As their career plans cratered, MBA students had a front-row seat for economic history in the making, courtesy of professors who quickly introduced new classes and case studies on the crisis. If the student response to those first few efforts is any indication, students returning to campus this fall can expect to encounter a lot of crowded classrooms in the most popular crisis-related courses.

At MIT, entrepreneurship professor Simon Johnson offered a course on the unfolding of the crisis as 2008 was drawing to a close, and even though the course wasn't offered for credit, students came anyway—between 60 and 100 attended each section, says Yates. Even where the financial crisis wasn't officially on the syllabus, she added, it quickly became part of the course. "The students are great...They force the discussions," says Yates. "Even if a faculty member wanted to get away with not talking [about the crisis], they couldn't." A money management course at Smith that focused on how big financial institutions are structured saw an increase in enrollment. And at Booth, macroeconomics saw a "crazy big" surge in enrollment last year, a trend that Anil Kashyap, professor of economics and finance, expects to continue in the fall semester.

Even one-off lectures by visiting speakers on crisis-related topics garnered standing-room-only crowds last year, a trend that is also likely to continue. At the Boston University School of Management (Boston Full-Time MBA Profile) students came "in droves" to the lectures it offered on the crisis last year, including a talk in September by finance professors about the implications for big banks, says Dean Louis Lataif. Talks at the University of California at Berkeley's Haas School of Business (Haas Full-Time MBA Profile)—including Laura Tyson's lecture on potential solutions to the crisis and Agilent CEO Bill Sullivan's talk on innovating during a downturn—also drew large crowds.

ETHICS AND COMPLIANCE

A few schools are going so far as as introducing whole new crisis-themed programs. The New England College of Business & Finance, a Boston institution that offers MBAs and other degrees online, is introducing a new masters degree in "business ethics and compliance" that it claims is the first of its kind in the nation. With courses in corporate governance, risk management, and government regulation, it's designed to educate future compliance managers and general managers well-versed in ethics and corporate governance.

In the fall, Smith will also introduce a new degree, the Master of Science in Business: Finance. Planning for the new part-time program, which will be offered at Smith's Washington (D.C.) campus, began before the financial crisis struck, but the school is stressing the degree's applicability to the post-crisis economy. Students in the program, which can be completed in 15 months, will learn about market and financial structures, and why financial institutions were susceptible to risk. The 12-credit core includes courses on valuation and derivatives, while electives cover financial restructuring and risk management.

Rachel Z. Arndt is a reporter for BusinessWeek.
By Rachel Z. Arndt and John Carey

**Changing the Energy Mix**

These are challenging times to be a CEO in the utility sector. Today's companies are under pressure from government and the public to deliver cleaner, greener power. They are also being forced to transform the ways they bring electricity to customers. Some companies are even paying people to use less of their product—Pacific Gas and Electric and many others are trying to encourage businesses to consume less power during peak hours. On the other side of the country, workers at Public Service Enterprise Group (PSEG) are going door to door in Trenton, N.J., giving away energy-efficient lightbulbs and insulation to help their customers use less power.

New federal regulations also mean that electric power companies must overhaul their decades-old business practices. Utilities must become more efficient in order to compete, and they must innovate. That helps explain a profusion of new concepts and technologies, including the "smart grid." The idea, basically, is to let electrons flow in any direction, so that businesses and individuals with solar panels on their roofs don't just buy power from the grid, but also sell it back.

But that's just one of many developments. MIT researcher Daniel Nocera is trying to perfect a new way to split hydrogen and oxygen using sunlight. If this and other strategies succeed, the future of electricity could be in the home, with individuals generating enough power to satisfy their own needs. There are more conventional solutions, too, such as paving stretches of deserts with solar panels, studding cornfields with windmills, and capturing the power of ocean waves. Here is a look at the old and new ways utilities are trying to meet the challenge.
by Rachel Z. Arndt (posted on Sept. 22, 2009)

An Indian Restaurant That's a Twist on Chipotle
Chutney Joe's
Vijay Puniani

The average Joe loves fast-food burgers and pizza. Chipotle Mexican Grill (CMG) proved that Joe also has an appetite for chain-restaurant tacos and burritos. Now, with America's Indian population rising, Vijay Puniani thinks average Joe is ready for chicken tikka masala and pork vindaloo at Chutney Joe's. Puniani, 58, a retired real-estate developer, opened his quick-serve restaurant in Chicago's Loop last February. He modeled Chutney Joe's on Chipotle, which boasts all-fresh ingredients in dishes prepared in front of you to your specifications. Customers start by choosing either basmati rice or naan, or flatbread. Then they select from four meat or five vegetarian entrées. There are also appetizers, desserts, and, of course, chutney. A full meal can be had for less than $10. Puniani began experimenting with recipes and preparation methods about two and a half years ago, using focus groups of 15 to 30 people. He had experience: In 1974, he opened a restaurant in New Delhi. Chutney Joe's turned cash-flow positive about four months in and now grosses $15,000 to $17,000 a week. Puniani, who put $500,000 of his own into the business, is looking for investors and franchisees to expand in Chicago and beyond. Why start in Chicago? A Starbucks (SBUX) exec once told him that if something succeeded in Chicago, it would succeed everywhere.
What is porn?

For Sam Benjamin Stern ’99, it was the possibility of pursuing art while making money. It was also a way out of the pot-smoking grind of his first post-college job as an organic farmer in California.

Last but not least, it was a way into publishing: His self-published first book, “Confessions of an Ivy League Pornographer,” was released this May.

Benjamin, who used his last name, Stern, while at Brown but now goes by just his first and middle names, “Sam Benjamin,” chronicles in the memoir his journey in and out of the porn industry — from directing videos to starring in them.

The book is told from the point of view of a “highly educated Jewish kid from North Carolina,” wrote Benjamin’s publicist, Shane Mahoney, in an e-mail to The Herald. The book is for the “postmodern, jaded, Gen-X crowd,” he added.

Indeed, Benjamin writes his story with no lack of self-consciousness, calling his decision to choose filming sex over harvesting tomatoes the “fantasy shared by every upper-middle-class, semi-hipster, slightly awkward Jew who’s ever done time in a college classroom.”

From 2000 to 2005, Benjamin made about 10 independent pornographic films and filmed hundreds of scenes for professional companies.

His interest in pornography goes back at least as far as his years at Brown. A concentrator in art-semiotics, he toyed around with editing existing porn films. He also drew a comic strip for The Herald called “Anxiety Comix.”

“I was super passionate about being a working artist,” he said, but “I wasn’t really talented.”

Benjamin wanted to bring an uncharted level of artistic thought to porn, pairing postmodernist thoughts — and even a bit of humanity — with eroticism. He tried his hand at it on and off from 2000 to 2005.

“Porno was this land of undiscovered opportunity,” he said. “I just knew I could do something better with it.”

Humble beginnings

After graduating from Brown, Benjamin left rainy Providence for California’s sun, taking a job at an organic tomato farm. The sun and home-grown marijuana took their toll, though, and Benjamin moved on.

“Brown, like most American liberal arts institutions operating in the latter part of the 20th century, had adopted the post-Modern way of thought as a virtual religion,” Benjamin writes in the book.

That “splendidly pretentious lexicon” taught him to play “the Creativity game, and play it to win.” He decided he could make art to make money — “I could use my brain to make a buck,” he writes.
Benjamin wanted to make “porn with soul,” according to Mahoney. So, while working at a juice bar, he struck up conversations about porn with anyone who would listen.

“I’m really surprised I didn’t get fired,” he said.

The start to his new career came in the form of a porn-loving 45-year-old named Dennis, whom he met at the juice bar.

Dennis offered to be in Benjamin’s first video at no cost. (“I’ll never forget him, because he was my first,” Benjamin said.)

But Benjamin “had to troll the Internet” to find Dennis’ counterpart. Eventually, he found a “super-smart, super-interesting” dominatrix named Janay, star of the “Debbie Does Whip-Ass” series.

Besides actors, Benjamin also needed a camera. He spent $1,000 on a “one-chip digital camera,” he said, after asking the salesman if he could return it after, which he did.

Benjamin’s first movie, “We Always Want,” was “hardly even a porno,” he says, but it was “the best film I ever made.” The film featured interviews with the actors to put “their personalities into the film” — something that most porn movies lack, he said.

He tried to sell copies of the video on eBay for $5.99 each. But success was hard to come by. He sold only five of his home-mastered VHS tapes.

“Hardly anyone’s ever seen it,” Benjamin says of the movie. “It’s my masterpiece.”

The porn industry, writ large

After nine months of hawking his homemade creation and working at his dream of independent erotic-film producing, Benjamin decided to move on to bigger things.

So he moved from Santa Cruz to Los Angeles, where he pushed his way into the industry with “chutzpah.”

Meanwhile, he had to make money and took odd jobs to make ends meet — including a stint as a go-go dancer in a gay bar.

His entrance into the “high-profile porn industry” came when an Internet company needed a producer and director for low-budget erotic films. Benjamin “lucked into the job,” he said, and kept it for about a year and a half.

“I was running the show — I was hiring people, I was getting paid good money,” he said. But “it was the opposite of what I had come into porn to do.”

Business slowed down, and the work Benjamin was doing for the softcore company Wett Channel fizzled. Benjamin was broke.

Soon he was stuck riding a bike in L.A., after his car broke and he had no cash to get it fixed. Benjamin didn’t want out, though, and he got his next chance, he said, “sooner than I expected.”

A sex-shop salesperson he’d met a year before in San Francisco called Benjamin with a request. She was directing a movie for the porn company Good Vibrations — her first — and she wanted Benjamin. But he wasn’t going to be behind the camera, she said. Instead, he’d be one of the actors.

Benjamin’s role in “Slide Bi Me” was fairly straightforward, he writes in the memoir. “My dreadlocked lover kissed me on the head, then pushed me towards a pink blanket. Lysette penetrated me from behind, and I rode the wave of her desire.”

Benjamin’s on-screen debut motivated him to stay in the industry. He continued working in L.A. — behind the camera once more — and even told his father what he’d been up to since college.

Then, the ubiquitous sex began to drag. Instead of changing things as he had intended, he was “doing exactly the same thing.” “Burnt out” from the work, he said, “I didn’t feel like being around people having sex that much.”

Pulling out

To sort himself out, Benjamin traveled to Asia, where he meditated and fasted. Then he applied to the California Institute of the
Arts, where he graduated in 2005 with a master's degree in critical studies and integrated media.

But that wasn’t the end of making porn for Benjamin. While pursuing his degree, he also pursued the gay porn industry.

The switch from heterosexual to homosexual porn was “refreshing,” he said.

“For some reason, in mainstream porn there’s an agenda,” he says. Women in straight porn are in the movies to be “degraded,” he said, but in gay porn, the men are not imposed upon to have sex.

Now, with a book “far cheaper than actual porn, and only 50 percent as shameful,” according to Benjamin’s Web site, his goal of successfully mixing sex, money and art may be about to reach its climax.

**Translating flesh to text**

Benjamin wrote the bulk of “Confessions of an Ivy League Pornographer” in six months in 2006, moving “forward in fits and starts,” he said. Now, while publicizing the book, he’s also at work on another volume.

“The whole project of writing this book is my artistic redemption,” he said.

He went into porn hoping to do something new with the genre, but he found the medium to be static. Porn is the same — “besides the aesthetic differences,” he said — again and again.

The tale features his stories of Viagra use — “penises get scared, too,” Benjamin writes — and theoretical examinations of a “world where women existed only as props.”

The chapters are separated by photo-comics dealing with postmodern art, “Small-town freaks on a leash” and alternate careers he might have pursued, among other explicit and artistic explorations.

Though Benjamin is self-publishing the book for now, he hopes to find a publisher and is working to drum up interest through social media sites, he said.

Benjamin has a literary agent in New York, according to Mahoney, and his goal is to find a publisher by mid-next year.

“Several hundred copies of the book” have been sold, Mahoney said, since it was released for the Amazon Kindle last May and as a paperback last August.

What’s more, Mahoney wrote, the book is already profitable, since “our margins on digital products are so low.”

Though Benjamin calls himself a “hack” — and admits he’ll always be one — he cites a “creative force” as the impetus behind his continued pursuit of artistry.

“It was a failure,” Benjamin said of his porn career. “But it was a funny failure.”

And, when it comes to Benjamin’s artistic redemption, the book may provide a happy ending.

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Some Brown U. Admission Officers Look at Applicants' Facebook Profiles

By RACHEL ARNDT, Brown Daily Herald

PROVIDENCE, R.I. -- This fall, Brown University hopefuls might want to consider a new potential aspect of the application process: their profiles on Facebook. Though they deny doing so on a regular basis, university admission officers sometimes follow up on anonymous tips to examine applicants' profiles.

These days, Facebook is no longer a place just for students -- as its Web site states, "All that's needed to join Facebook is a valid email address." There are currently 39 million active members on the social networking site.

"We don't use Facebook unless someone says there's something we should look at," said Dean of Admission James Miller. But Miller conceded that admission officers take outside tips seriously. "Anything we get, we follow up on," he said.

Associate Director of College Admission Elisha Anderson agreed with Miller. There is a "limit to what we can appropriately judge people on," he said, but added, "You have to remember (Facebook) is a public place." He said there was "maybe one case" in which Facebook yielded information that affected an admission decision.

Sometimes admission officers receive friend requests on Facebook from applicants, Anderson said, noting that accepting the requests "would appear weird."

At least one admission officer at Brown questioned even case-by-case visits to Facebook profiles when evaluating applications.

"I don't think that's a fair practice," said Victor Ning, a Brown admission officer who said he looks only at the materials the students send to the office. Though he said he doesn't think admission officers consult Facebook during the application "reading season," he still warned, "Students should definitely be careful," adding that potential employers could be on Facebook too.

Barmak Nassirian, associate executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, was stunned that any admission officers would use Facebook in the admission process. "If they use it, our recommendation would be to stop immediately because it's inappropriate," he said.

Nassirian expressed concern about the importance of boundaries in checking students' backgrounds.

"Where do you stop?" Nassirian asked. If admission officers began to systematically use Facebook, he worried, they might then begin to treat the admission process as an investigation.
The admission process should include only the information the student consents to giving, he said. For an admission officer to look at something the student has not submitted is "highly problematic," Nassirian said.

Nassirian was careful to distinguish between finding information accidentally and seeking it out in media like Facebook. It is acceptable if an admission officer were to accidentally find information about an applicant through a medium other than the application, he said.

Though the practice of checking on college applicants' Facebook profiles is not widespread, Nassirian said, students should understand that their "behavior out there on the Web is behavior in public."

Anderson said he has interacted with college applicants on Facebook. One student's profile picture was "a little bit inappropriate," Anderson said, so he sent the student a message advising him to change his picture.

"I don't look at high school students who are applying to Brown on the Facebook," he said. Still, his Facebook profile's education and work information includes a description of his work at Brown: "I'm the Decider."
Little Rhody getting big on microbeer front

Rachel Arndt

Published: Thursday, April 24, 2008
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The smallest state packs quite a punch when it comes to the smallest beers. Building on its craft-beer brewery and a handful of brewpubs, Rhode Island is gaining strength in the microbeer scene.

Craft beer, which is produced independently on a small scale using traditional methods - and boasts more complex and intense flavors than mass-produced beer - is on the rise in Rhode Island and across the country. The industry has had a 58 percent increase in sales over the last four years, says Julia Herz, craft beer program director for the Brewers Association.

But craft brewers are fighting the spike in prices of two of their most important ingredients - hops and barley - which they use to make their ales more flavorful than big brands like Budweiser. In the last year, the price of hops has increased 350 to 400 percent, according to Aaron Crossett, a brewer at Providence's Union Station Brewery.

As a result, some craft brewers are turning to beer that derives most of its flavor from yeast and not hops, and others are forced to take in less of a profit despite charging higher prices.

Coastal Extreme Brewing Co., which calls itself the state's only microbrewery, had to raise its prices for only the second time in its history to deal with the hops shortage, but "we won't be forced to reformulate," says Brent Ryan, the brewery's president.

But while higher grain prices are putting brewers in a pinch - the commodities are more costly in part due to the rising price of corn ethanol, Crossett says - specialty brewers see another, more favorable trend: increasing demand.

"It seems that consumers are embracing the beers," says Gregg Glaser, editor of Yankee Brew News and news editor for All About Beer Magazine. "The overwhelming majority of Americans drink mainstream American beer," he says, but the craft beer movement is "always growing throughout the U.S."

Craft brewers tend to make ales and not lagers, Glaser says, which fits in well with New England's beer past. "We were always more of an ale-brewing and drinking part of the country," he says. "The roots of New England brewing" lie in ales, he says.

While the East Coast is known for making more ales, the Midwest has more lager in its history. The difference between an ale and a lager lies in the type of yeast used.

Ryan says he is trying to "get people away from just drinking yellow fizzy beer." He and three other Colby College graduates started Coastal Extreme Brewing after realizing there wasn't a microbrewery in Rhode Island. Now, nine years later, the Newport Storm producer is still the only true distributing microbrewery in the state.

"The one thing that we really wanted to do," Ryan says, was "develop a local brewery." Coastal Extreme sells 85 percent of its five lines of beer in Rhode Island and only exports to Connecticut and Massachusetts. "We really wanted to give an identity to our beer and Rhode Island beer in general," he says.

The brewery makes about 4,500 barrels of beer a year in 20-barrel batches. Though some brews take longer to make, most are done in about two weeks, Ryan says.

"A lot of the mantra of the craft beer movement is to drink local," Glaser says. "It's really easy to do that in New England."

"We also wanted to make beers that didn't just focus on hops, (but) that also focused on the malt characteristic," Ryan says. The brewery's Hurricane Amber Ale has a "sweet malty flavor balanced by ample but delicate hopping," according to the company's Web site.
But the current shortage of hops is not what turned the company to maltier beers. To change the recipes of their beer "just to react to a cost situation doesn't seem like a good idea for us," Ryan says. The focus on malt makes Coastal Extreme Brewing's beer noticeably different from other craft beer, he says.

Union Station Brewery, on the other hand, is turning to different kinds of beer to deal with the ingredient shortage. The brewery, part of the John Harvard's Brew House chain, is "experimenting with some Belgian ales," Crossett says, which get most of their flavor from yeast, not hops and barley. This makes "a nice, big-bodied, full-flavored beer," he says.

India Pale Ales, which rely on hops for their bitter taste, are very expensive to make, Crossett says, and "a lot of craft brewers are starting to adjust." Still, he says, "it's tough to see where it goes from here."

Despite the struggle against high-priced ingredients, Union Station has not stopped making its most well-known beers - the Golden Spike, the brewpub's "flagship pale ale" with a "nice light American style" and the Half Bay IPA, according to Crossett.

The brewery produces all of its beer in the restaurant using a 10-barrel system. The small batches allow for more "flavor and really a lot more depth," Crossett says.

"It's really all about just being local," he says.

"Something that's unique about brewpubs is that they can brew in very small batches," Glaser says.

Union Station Brewery works with a 10-barrel system, Crossett says, to create "hand-crafted, small-batch" brews. The beer-making process itself is "pretty simple," he says.

Like Union Station Brewery, Trinity Brewhouse, Providence's other brewpub, takes advantage of the ability to change its beer menu throughout the year. But Trinity, which opened in 1994, has taken its role as a brewpub one step further - the restaurant's Trinity Beer Company began selling its bottled Trinity IPA at liquor stores and bars in 2005.

Trinity's head brewer, Sean Larkin, "comes from a food background," Glaser says. "It's always interesting to see chefs" making beer with unique recipes and tastes, Glaser says.

Trinity's most popular beer is its IPA, but the brewhouse always serves either a lager or pilsener and a porter or stout. "What we focus on is stuff that we feel is seasonal," says Josh Miller, owner of the brewhouse.

The growing popularity of craft beers can be attributed in part to a maturing American beer palette, Miller says. "Consumers are starting to warm up to full-flavored beers."

The "resurgence" of larger microbrews, like Samuel Adams and Dogfish Head, has helped too, Crossett says. Samuel Adams Boston Lager was the second highest selling craft beer in 2007, after Sierra Nevada Pale Ale.

Herz compares the increased demand for craft beers to the rise of dark chocolate: "People want flavorful and diverse products."

The northeast region is third in craft beer case sales, ranking after California and the West, according to the Brewers Association, and craft beer makes up 9.9 percent of beer sold in supermarkets.

"A lot of people are getting tired of the Bud Lights and the Coors Lights," Crossett says.

But craft beer's higher price tag is a snag in its popularity, Ryan says. "It's more expensive than Budweiser or Coors or Miller," he says, but "it also tastes quite a bit different."

A six-pack from Coastal Extreme Brewing costs about $7.49, and a six-pack from Trinity costs $7.99, but the same amount of Bud Light costs more than $2 less.

Big-name American lagers "tend not to be as assertive in flavor," he says. "When people try our beer, there's a flavor profile hurdle they have to get over. We think it's a hurdle they should want to get over."

"Where I see the biggest opportunity for us is getting people to stop drinking some of this imported beer," Ryan says. People who drink imported beer are already willing to spend more, so "you don't have to get over the price hurdle at that point."
"Don’t just think because you spent more money you got something better," Ryan says.

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