



Perry proposes higher ed reforms to regents

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AUSTIN — Gov. Rick Perry on Wednesday urged university regents to consider several potentially controversial changes in policy, including merit bonuses for some teachers and state grants of scholarships, or “vouchers,” directly to students.

“We have to take these reforms, we have to put them in place and we have to be responsible for them,” said Perry, who co-hosted a wide-ranging higher education summit with the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation.

Rising tuition, which has strained the budgets of many Texas students and their families since Perry signed a tuition deregulation law in 2003, barely was mentioned all day. But the governor said his proposed reforms, which also include separating universities' research and education budgets and changing how tenure is determined for some professors, would make higher education “more accessible.”

In an interview Tuesday, Perry said he was concerned that higher education is “becoming out of reach” for some Texans. But a spokesman said the governor still supports the deregulation law, enacted to help the Legislature bridge a \$10 billion revenue shortfall without raising state taxes.

Under that law, university regents consistently have raised tuition, arguing that the increases are necessary because legislative appropriations haven't kept pace with student growth and other university needs.

Some of the governor's proposals, which also were endorsed by the TPPF, likely would require changes in state law. No legislators attended the meeting, to which Perry invited members of all the state university governing boards plus a number of business-oriented people.

Rep. Lois Kolkhorst, chairwoman of an appropriations subcommittee that writes the higher education budget, was pleased that Perry is opening a discussion well in advance of the legislative session that begins in January.

“Higher education is not quick to change,” said Kolkhorst, a Brenham Republican. “What is difficult for us is to demand changes in Texas when the rest of the nation isn't going to change and we could lose talent.”

But as higher education budgets have grown faster than inflation and population growth, Kolkhorst said, it's time to ask what students are getting for their money.

The governor urged regents, all his appointees, to immediately begin considering his proposals.

Bill Jones, chairman of the Texas A&M University System Board of Regents, was receptive.

“These are the kinds of things we need to do to push our institutions to the next level (of performance),” he said.

University of Texas regents Chairman H. Scott Caven said he didn't necessarily agree with all the recommendations, but he said it was important “that these issues be put on the table and discussed.”

Houston Chronicle reporter Clay Robison is the Austin Bureau chief.

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