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Regents must tackle cost structure of higher education

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Just as another class of Texans graduated from college, the Texas Public Policy Foundation and Governor Rick Perry gathered Regents from the state's major university systems on May 21 to discuss how to take Texas higher education to the next level.

One of the foremost challenges facing higher education is increasing costs.

Colleges and universities claim that reduced state funding has forced them to increase tuition, but appropriations per student at Texas's four-year colleges and universities have remained steady in inflation adjusted dollars.

Instead, the tuition increases hitting students and their parents are the result of dramatic increases in universities' costs.

Consider the following:

- The total cost per full-time equivalent student at UT-Austin in inflation-adjusted dollars increased from \$21,251 in 1980 to \$36,769 in 2008.
- Non-instructional staff has ballooned from 44 percent in 1976 to 79 percent in 2005, while faculty instructional productivity has declined.
- Roughly half of the faculty at Texas universities teaches less than four hours a week and 21 percent don't teach at all.
- The cost per student at the country's largest "for profit" university is \$10,818, less than one-third of our public universities.

Rising tuition is merely a symptom of a larger problem: the unsustainable growth in higher education cost.

Unfortunately, there is little incentive for public universities to operate efficiently or respond to what their customers – the students and their parents – actually demand. Increasing state appropriations actually perpetuates the unsustainable growth in spending by public universities.

Many in the higher education establishment have turned in Oscar-worthy performances playing the role of martyrs, and casting blame on Texas policymakers for deregulating tuition in 2003.

This clever act aims to convince legislators to further the status quo and provide even more state aid. Thankfully Texas Tech's Board of Regents bravely changed the script several weeks ago, deciding to target its costs rather than raise tuition for the fall semester.

Many of our universities have become research institutions that provide an impersonal education, assigning undergraduate teaching to graduate students and adjunct faculty members in enormous lecture halls.

One of the first recommendations from the summit was for universities to adopt results-based learning contracts to help students measure the quality of their experience.

Research shows students are excellent judges of learning, especially when deliverables for a course are clearly stated.

Contracts between students, deans and teachers should disclose graduation rates and job placement for similar students, average class size, teaching evaluations for faculty and the skills or lessons the class is designed to convey.

Another recommendation was assuring students that tenured professors can – and do – actually teach.

Before offering professor tenure, universities must revisit their primary mission of educating our children and require professors applying for tenure to demonstrate an ability to teach.

Unfortunately, demonstrated teaching ability is currently not a prerequisite for a lifetime teaching job at most universities. The current structure at Texas universities gives teachers very little incentive to strive toward excellence.

For all teachers who consistently deliver on their courses learning objectives, another of the recommendations suggests providing professors bonuses of up to \$10,000 per class.

In addition, using student evaluation forms at each university, professors ranking in the top 25 percent would receive bonuses.

Since bonuses would also be based on the number of students taught each year, full-time faculty would have an incentive to spend more time in the classroom.

To balance compensation and incentives among university professors and research faculty, universities should separate teaching and research budgets to reward excellence in each area.

Tenured faculty would be compensated based on the funds raised for their research, number of student taught and teaching effectiveness.

Students and taxpayers, in turn, should be able to review how much universities spend on teaching and teacher salaries versus research and researcher salaries and administration.

Texas could go even further in reorienting higher education budgets – and attracting more students to college – by considering redirecting state allocations into student scholarships.

The goal of these higher education reforms is to make Texas the nation's leader in higher education and to attract the best students, professors, and researchers to Texas.

In their appointed capacity as leaders of these university systems, regents can establish a new vision for Texas higher education that reorients these already strong institutions to be more competitive, more efficient and more responsive to the students they serve.

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