

## *The Faculty*

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From the issue dated January 30, 2009

# Professors Compete for Bonuses Based on Student Evaluations

**Texas A&M plan to 'empower students' raises fears of grade inflation among faculty members vying for big bucks**

By KATHERINE MANGAN

College Station, Tex.

Some faculty members at Texas A&M University will each be \$10,000 richer next month, and they will have their students to thank.

The university system is awarding bonuses ranging from \$2,500 to \$10,000 to faculty members who received the highest grades on end-of-semester student evaluations. The competition is being held here on the flagship campus as well as at Kingsville and Prairie View, and it will be extended to all of the system's nine campuses this spring.

The chancellor, Michael D. McKinney, believes the bonuses are a good way to recognize dedicated instructors. Critics counter that the change could lead to grade inflation and encourage professors to cater to students. "We object to this idea that students are consumers and the customer is always right," says Clint W. Magill, a professor of plant pathology and speaker of the Faculty Senate here. "They don't realize we're not selling our courses."

But in a neighboring state — Oklahoma — that has experimented with similar bonuses, educators say there is no evidence of grades' softening.

Professors in Texas have to enter the contest to win the extra money. While the debate on the value or the corrupting influence of the bonuses swirls, 11 students here who have been assigned to select this campus's winners will gather around a conference table this week to start sifting through applications from the finalists.

"We don't pay our teachers nearly enough, and this is one way I saw to get money to them and empower students to brag on their teachers," says Dr. McKinney, who is also a family physician. The bonuses won't be used in tenure or promotion decisions, and no one will be punished for a negative evaluation.

About 300 of College Station's 1,800 teaching faculty members applied, along with about 100 each on the Kingsville and Prairie View campuses. The chancellor says he is seeking \$12-million from the Legislature to extend the program for two years.

Dr. McKinney says he got the idea from the University of Oklahoma, which has run a similar pilot program in its engineering and business schools for the past four semesters.

Oklahoma awards \$5,000 to \$10,000 to participating engineering professors who score in the top 5 percent on their semester-end student evaluations. Those who score in the next 15 percent receive half those amounts. Similar bonuses are offered for top-rated business professors.

Thomas L. Landers, dean of engineering at Oklahoma, says the recipients include professors who are known for being tough graders. "So far there's no evidence that the awards are changing anyone's grading behaviors," he says.

Another Texas institution, the Acton School of Business, ties instructors' pay even more closely to student evaluations. Faculty members at the small, private school, who are all entrepreneurs, receive \$5,000 per course, and the rest of their salary is based on bonuses determined solely by the evaluations. What's more, the faculty member with the lowest score is dismissed for a year. During that time, the instructor is expected to complete pedagogical training and observe classes taught by highly rated instructors (*The Chronicle*, December 14, 2007).

### **Faculty Senate Opposition**

Relying on student evaluations sends shivers up the spines of professors like Mr. Magill. He says student evaluations don't prove that students are actually learning what they need to be learning.

"If you ask a professor what is the easiest way to raise his grade, he might say, 'Invite the students over for a beer,'" Mr. Magill jokes. More seriously, he says, what some instructors are likely to do "is make the course easier." He will not, he insists: "I don't care how much you pay me, I'm not going to give you an A." He chafes at the chancellor's description of the bonus as a measure of customer satisfaction.

In September the Faculty Senate at College Station approved a resolution opposing the bonus plan. The Student Government Association, after hearing presentations from both the chancellor and Mr. Magill, said it, too, had concerns. "We loved the concept but felt it needed some work," said Cody Vasut, a graduate student in human resources who is speaker of the Student Senate.

The student government created a 13-member committee, made up of students from each of the university's colleges, to flesh out the evaluation process. It starts with a 16-item questionnaire on each professor that students in their courses filled out in November, bubbling in responses ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."

Because of the concerns raised by faculty members, the committee decided to add another level of review for the finalists. At that point, the committee asks for each finalist's syllabus, a statement of teaching philosophy, and comments from a department head. The students also hope to examine the grade distributions for each course. Although the questionnaires will be the main criterion for the awards, the student panel will also consider the additional factors.

"If it looks like someone is making the course too easy in hopes of getting better scores, we'll probably just nix that application," says Kolin Loveless, a senior who is co-chair of the evaluation committee.

### **Evaluating Evaluations**

To come up with the student questionnaire, the university solicited five statements about teaching quality from each of four groups: faculty members, students, administrators, and system officials, and winnowed those down to 16.

"Everyone seems to think that I stepped out of the shower and made these up," the chancellor says. He adds that the university offers other teaching awards, which consider factors other than student evaluations.

None of the other awards, however, have generated such controversy. B. Robert Kreiser, an associate secretary in the department of academic freedom, tenure, and governance at the American Association of University Professors, calls the bonus plan "a terrible idea." Student evaluations, he says, "should be one of several measures of how a teacher is doing."

William H. Pallett, leader of a nonprofit testing service that helps 275 colleges evaluate teaching effectiveness, agrees. "Student evaluations are useful in evaluating faculty, but they certainly should not be the be-all, end-all," says Mr. Pallett, president of the IDEA Center. "We believe they shouldn't count for more than 30 to 50 percent of the evaluation of teaching." Other criteria could include peer evaluations, teaching portfolios, and reflective statements, he says.

A hint of politics is adding to the controversy. The new bonus system was announced a few months after a higher-education summit in May that was arranged by Gov. Rick Perry, a Republican and Texas A&M alumnus, and the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative-leaning think tank. Paying faculty members bonuses based on student evaluations was one of the recommendations that came out of the summit, which was attended by regents of the state's public universities.

Some faculty members are unconvinced by the Texas A&M chancellor's assertion that he was planning the bonuses before the conference was held. "This comes out of a higher-education summit arranged and run by a policy foundation with an agenda to apply a business model to higher education," says David Weissenburger, president of the Texas Council of Faculty Senates. "Many of us question whether this is an appropriate model for higher education. When a salesman sells you a car, he has nothing to do with the future of that person — it's just 'Can I sell you something?'"

David Guenther, a spokesman for the public-policy foundation, says he isn't surprised by the uproar. "When you go to a system where you recognize high achievement and create a greater level of accountability, there's going to be nervousness until people see how it works," he says. "The people who have been skating by and punching the clock while collecting their checks aren't going to be able to hide anymore."

At Texas A&M, however, the emphasis clearly isn't on exposing bad teaching but on rewarding good teaching. And some students think the plan's critics underestimate them.

"I understand their concerns, but a student can distinguish between a good teacher and a popular teacher," says Mark Womack, another student co-chair of the evaluation group. "But we'll have a system of checks and balances, just in case."

<http://chronicle.com>

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