

A&M project has students grading their professors

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Faculty members at three Texas A&M University campuses could be \$10,000 richer within a few weeks.

But most won't be. They opted out of a controversial awards program that has drawn national disdain for introducing marketplace economics into the world of academia.

"I don't think it's the right way to do things," said Clint Magill, a professor of plant pathology on the College Station campus, where just 12 percent of faculty members applied for the awards.

The money — based on student ratings and ranging from \$2,500 to \$10,000 — will be distributed later this month at three schools: the flagship campus in College Station, Prairie View A&M University and Texas A&M University-Kingsville. Participation was slightly higher on the two smaller campuses: 21 percent at Prairie View and about 20 percent at A&M-Kingsville.

A&M officials say the program, which is modeled on one at the University of Oklahoma, gives students a bigger voice. They plan to expand it to all nine universities in the A&M system.

A&M campuses, like most universities, already gave students a chance to evaluate their professors, but this is the first time student ratings there have been tied to financial rewards.

The idea of rewarding faculty based on student evaluations was one of seven pitched by Gov. Rick Perry when he called together university leaders from schools across the state last spring, though A&M officials say they had the idea before that. Perry, who co-hosted the summit with the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation, said he wanted to make higher education more accessible and more responsive to students.

Several regents from A&M and other schools said they would consider Perry's ideas. Reaction from faculty members was more pointed.

"Students are attending colleges and universities to be educated," said Robert Kreiser of the American Association of University Professors. "They're not there as customers. They're not there to get a product as one would in a supermarket or a department store."

Perry hasn't scheduled another meeting with regents but wants universities to try different reforms and report back on what has worked, said Katherine Cesinger, the governor's spokeswoman.

"Anything that's going to increase accountability but also keep quality instruction is definitely a positive first step," she said.

A popularity contest?

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A&M set aside \$1.1 million for the three-school pilot program, but Frank B. Ashley III, vice chancellor of academic affairs, said it will cost less, because so few faculty members signed up.

Only those who score in the top 18 percent on student evaluations will receive any money.

A&M has asked the Legislature for an additional \$12 million to spread the program to all A&M campuses.

The program has been hotly debated in national publications devoted to higher education, mostly over whether students are qualified to rate faculty teaching expertise and whether the practice will lead to grade inflation. The broader criticism has been that it attempts to apply business practices to academia.

Magill, who is speaker of the Faculty Senate on the College Station campus and who did not apply for a bonus, raised concerns that professors who teach easier courses would be rated more highly.

Student evaluations are influenced by all kinds of factors, said Angie Hill Price, an associate professor of engineering at the College Station campus.

"Most people don't realize when a teacher was a good teacher until they go out and use the information," said Hill, who did not participate. "I get many e-mails from former students who say, 'I really hated your class but ... thank you for being tough.'"

Students involved in the process said they listened to faculty concerns.

Kolin Loveless, a chemical engineering major from Lubbock, said students wanted the program to reflect student opinion "but with checks to ensure it's not just a popularity contest."

None of his professors applied, so he didn't fill out the 16-question form, which Ashley said was compiled with input from administrators, faculty and students at each campus.

Not all faculty reaction has been negative, however.

"Anytime we can get some extra money in the pockets of faculty, that's my position," said Grace Goodie, an instructor in the human sciences department at Prairie View A&M and speaker of the Faculty Senate there.

Goodie participated and will find out how she fared later this month. But she said the bigger bonus will be a mentoring program started by Prairie View faculty members after thinking about the student evaluations.

"It really helped our faculty to understand the need to take extra time, that they will be valued even more by students because they gave them the opportunity to talk out their problems," she said.

'Something significant'

No other Texas university has announced plans

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for tying financial awards to student evaluations, but that hasn't stopped the chatter in faculty circles.

"I think most faculty members see this as something significant," said David Weissenburger, president of the Texas Council of Faculty Senates, which represents faculty at all Texas four-year public universities.

The issue isn't whether A&M faculty should get a bonus, but whether it is appropriate to use a traditional business model — customer-driven awards — for academia, he said.

Universities should be accountable, Weissenberger said. But he noted that faculty members are also expected to conduct scholarly research and provide community or campus service.

"I'm not diminishing teaching," he said. "That's our primary role, but there are other criteria."

Ashley predicted the concerns will ease when the winners are announced.

"When faculty members see the people that are getting the rewards, that it's not goof-offs but people who are excellent teachers, I think more people will buy in to the award," he said.

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