

A&M regents push reforms

By VIMAL PATEL

vimal.patel@theeagle.com

Published Sunday, June 13, 2010 12:12 AM

Texas A&M is implementing reforms pitched by a conservative think tank that advocates holding tenured professors more accountable, viewing students like customers and universities like businesses, and reining in spending to become more efficient.

The Texas Public Policy Foundation -- whose 14 board members have collectively given more than \$1.4 million to Gov. Rick Perry's campaign fund -- presented the "seven breakthrough solutions" at a May 2008 higher education summit it hosted in Austin attended by Perry and 45 of Texas' university regents, including all nine from the A&M System board.

Now, two years later, A&M regents are voicing their clearest support for the ideas.

In their rawest form, which isn't necessarily how they'll unfold at Texas A&M, they include additional standards before faculty members are granted tenure, splitting teaching and research budgets so universities are more transparent and accountable to taxpayers in how money is spent, and creating a "simple tool" to measure faculty efficiency.

"Higher education today isn't focused on serving its customers," said Bill Peacock, the foundation's vice president for research. "It's focused on serving the institution."

The reforms are a "priority," A&M Regent Bill Jones firmly told the system's presidents during last month's board meeting. "We haven't been harping on this every [board] meeting. Perhaps we should have," the Austin attorney said. "We're not going away on this."

Chancellor Mike McKinney, the head of the 11-university Texas A&M System and a former Perry chief of staff, said each of the reforms are in varying stages. Through a spokesman, he declined to comment for this story.

Some of the reforms would need legislative approval, like putting state money directly into students' hands in what resembles a voucher system to make higher education institutions more competitive, and supporting the creation of a new national accrediting agency that focuses more on output, or results.

One of the most compelling reforms -- rewarding instructors with awards of up to \$10,000 based on anonymous student evaluations, called "customer satisfaction" -- has already been rolled out at all A&M campuses, starting at the flagship College Station campus and two others in fall 2008. It has been met with faculty resistance, but McKinney assured regents he will boost participation, which has been sparse, in the voluntary program.

Implementation of many of the ideas is complicated, officials said, but administrators are scrambling to put together some version of them.

Frank Ashley, the vice chancellor for academic affairs for the A&M System and the person McKinney put in charge of the project, said he wasn't exactly sure who created the reforms.

"I just know there was a meeting in Austin that regents were invited to," he said. "We were handed this by regents. Here are seven breakthrough solutions to higher education. We've been given a charge to work on these."

He added: "I don't think that anyone could be totally against these concepts. The devil's in the details."

The customer

At the 2008 meeting, Perry urged regents to consider "the customer" -- primarily students and parents, but also employers and taxpayers. He then introduced Jeff Sandefer, a Texas Public Policy Foundation board member who, records show, has donated more than \$300,000 to the governor and is co-founder of the private Acton School of Business in Austin.

Sandefer declined to comment for this story, saying through his assistant that he had worked on the reforms but hasn't done anything with them since. He wrote a May 2009 article titled "Public Universities Belong to the Public, Not the Faculty" that expressed the foundation's themes.

"It's time for the Texas Legislature to stop writing 'blank checks' to our state colleges and universities for tenured professors to spend as they please," Sandefer wrote.

"Instead, all state higher education funding should be directed to scholarships, so universities once again will have to answer to the people who pay the bills. That's the only way students, parents, and taxpayers will ever regain control of our universities."

The student-directed scholarships would serve two purposes, advocates say: increase college access to low-income students by "demystifying" the process of paying for college, and making clear that students are the customer and therefore promoting competition among institutions to compete for their dollars.

Another of the foundation's reforms calls for using "'results-based' contracts with students to measure quality." Universities would provide each applicant with a "learning contract" that would disclose the graduation rate, average starting salary for a student in that major, average class size, teaching evaluations for the faculty member and how educational value will be added. Students and instructors would sign the contract.

Some faculty members said they found inherent contradictions in the group's advocacy of lower education costs and a belief in a free-market approach to education.

"To try to compare a student to a customer, there's a real disconnect some place," said Clint Magill, a former speaker of the Faculty Senate. "If we were doing that model, we could be charging a lot more because we have a lot more applicants than we accept."

The fall 2009 freshman class had around 8,000 students from about 26,000 applications.

Governor's support

At that May 2008 meeting, regents were introduced to the seven reforms, and walked away with supplementary information in the form of short explanations broken down in sections: goals, carrying out the reform and possible objections.

According to a Texas Public Policy Foundation report on the conference, Perry told attendees, "There is not a more important set of reforms; there is not a more influential amount of public policy that can change the world, as what you're talking about right here."

A Perry spokeswoman, Allison Castle, did not return a message for this story.

It doesn't appear any board has voiced support for the reforms the way the A&M System board has. Though university regents are known for their support of Perry -- in Texas, the governor appoints regents, and the majority have donated money to him -- the A&M board is especially known for its loyalty to the Aggie governor. Jay Kimbrough, his former chief of staff, is now the board's special adviser.

The governor's support for the reforms was active beyond the conference.

Perry policy experts sent e-mails to regents every few weeks for at least several months after the 2008 summit asking about progress on the reforms, documents obtained by *The Eagle* through an open-records request show.

Then-Texas A&M President Elsa Murano, who resigned last June amid a clash with McKinney and regents, was not included on the dozens of e-mails obtained by *The Eagle*, nor were the other presidents of Texas universities. Sandefer was.

Some faculty members raised concerns about the level of political involvement and creating what they called simplistic solutions to complicated problems.

"I don't think these are reforms -- I think they're dangerous meddling in the way the university runs," said Peter Hugill, the president of the local chapter of the American Association of University Professors. "And it implies, from my perspective anyway, that the Board of Regents is not doing the job they were appointed to do, which is understand how the university actually runs."

Increasing costs

The Texas Public Policy Foundation's limited-government ideas have worried top-level Texas A&M University officials enough to, in early 2009, write a 17-page response to a paper by the group titled "The High Cost of Higher Education." The A&M paper characterized the group's research in many cases as flawed, inaccurate and misleading.

One fact isn't disputed: Texas A&M students, like higher-education seekers everywhere, are paying significantly more today for an education than 10 years ago.

Tuition and mandatory fees for full-time, in-state students for the 1999-2000 year totaled \$3,200, according to Texas A&M's Office of Institutional Studies and Planning. In the 2009-10 year, the same student paid \$8,200.

According to the foundation's paper, the rise in tuition can't be blamed on a shortage of state funding, but instead on a "distorted marketplace" where there is no incentive to contain costs.

"In fact, the incentives in higher education are such that rather than focusing on cost containment," the eight-page paper states, "the goal is to increase operating budgets in an effort to increase access to resources and attract more acclaimed faculty."

Texas A&M officials note that the university is different than 10 years ago: It joined the prestigious Association of American Universities, implemented former President Robert Gates' faculty reinvestment program that boosted faculty ranks by 450, invested in campus infrastructure and expanded its research enterprise.

In A&M's response to the foundation's paper, officials wrote, "Texas A&M and the University of Texas were recently ranked first and second in the nation, respectively, by *The Wall Street Journal's Smart Money* magazine for payback ratio (earnings levels of graduates compared to what they pay for tuition and related fees), providing evidence that argues against the author's contention that Texas universities are overcharging their students."

Accountability

What officials believe one of the messiest reforms would be, and are unclear how or if it could be implemented, is splitting the university's teaching and research budgets.

The reform calls for paying teachers based on the number of students taught with a "significant" bonus for "customer [student] satisfaction," and paying researchers based on the sponsored research dollars they attract.

At a research university like Texas A&M where teaching and research are intertwined, Ashley said, implementing this reform would be incredibly difficult.

"Let's say I'm working with my doctoral or master's students on research. That's research, but it's teaching, too," Ashley said. "It would be very hard to define what percentage is teaching and what percentage is research. ... We don't think it's a bad idea. There are so many gray areas. That's another thing we're looking at: What do we do with the gray areas?"

Texas A&M President R. Bowen Loftin said it would be even more difficult at the College Station campus because roughly 75 percent of its faculty are tenured or tenure-track and A&M has been looking for faculty members who excel at both teaching and research.

"We've deliberately been hiring people who are well in both areas to grow our faculty's strength and grow our university's image. And we've been successful."

Loftin's general thoughts about the ideas: "From a standpoint of what they propose, what they champion, those are very valid things to talk about: rewarding good teaching, for example, is a noble thing to do."

Another reform is measuring teaching efficiency and effectiveness and publicly recognizing extraordinary teachers. The following data would be gathered for each teacher: salary and benefit cost, number of students taught over the last year, average "student satisfaction rating" and "average percentage" of As and Bs given.

This reform calls for dividing the employment cost per teacher by the number of students taught, and creating a rank from highest to lowest cost per student taught. Then, in several prominent locations in their respective colleges, post the student ratings and number of students taught for each faculty member.

"This will help students to identify the best teachers and encourage all teachers to improve their effectiveness and efficiency," the reform states.

McKinney, the head of the Texas A&M System, said the system is working on a comprehensive database of faculty teaching loads. He said five or six data sets are being combined, that he has "very good people working on it," and that he hopes to have it complete by the next board meeting in July.

"This is a feat," McKinney said. "It's not complete. It's not ready for prime time."

Tenure

One of the reforms tackles academic tenure.

It calls for most tenure appointments to be given to teachers who have taught "on average three classes per semester and thirty students per class for the seven or more years that a teacher is on the tenure track," and for student satisfaction ratings to determine teaching effectiveness. Average teacher ratings, the reform states, must be at least a 4.5 on a 5.0 scale.

Ashley said that universities already require evidence of good teaching before tenure is granted. This, he said, takes other factors into consideration, like student, peer and dean evaluations, classroom visits by deans or department chairs, and other requirements.

He said the specifics in the original reform are not a part of the discussion.

"If you're a physics professor at one of our regional institutions, I don't know if you're going to be able to teach three classes with 30 people per semester for seven years," Ashley said.

The University of Houston System hired an outside firm, the Pappas Consulting Group Inc., to examine the seven reforms following the May 2008 meeting. At A&M, Ashley joked, it was "only the firm of Frank, Frank and Ashley."

Pappas generally advocated careful study before implementing any of the reforms.

"We recognize the desire to make things simple and the view of some critics that claiming something like evaluating excellent teaching or productivity is complex is not more than a diversionary tactic," the report stated. "However, we stand by our position that these are indeed complex matters and do not lend themselves to 'simple tools' or 'one-size-fits-all' solutions."