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Public universities could stand more accountability

By **JUSTIN KEENER**
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Texans like to keep a close eye on their government. That is why financial transparency is state policy, and anyone can go to [TexasTransparency.org](#) and see where many of their tax dollars are being spent.

Building upon Texas' nationally-recognized reforms, House Bill 2504 by state Rep. Lois Kolkhorst, R-Brenham, was passed unanimously by the Legislature, requiring more openness from our state's public universities.

But no good deed goes unpunished, and Texas is now under rhetorical attack from certain academic institutions and faculty associations.

The Dallas Morning News quoted a University of Texas at Dallas professor who called the new law "an insulting mistrust of higher education faculty."

University of Houston-Downtown Professor Michelle Moosally went further in referring to taxpayers evaluating the work of academia, telling the Houston Chronicle, "[the] public isn't well-enough aware of what we do and who we are to evaluate us."

What hubris! Just imagine if we applied Moosally's standard to taxes, road building, the justice system, or anything else of complexity. Citizens would be left in the dark anytime a public employee said the taxpayer was not "well-enough aware" of their work. Well, sunlight is needed to make them aware, and professors should embrace the diffusion of knowledge, rather than fight it.

What treachery did the Legislature undertake to engender this anger? Universities must now post more information online: course syllabi, lecture topics, student evaluations of faculty, total cost of attendance, financial aid information, course requirements, departmental budgets, work study opportunities, and the professors' credentials.

Much of this has been done for years, but not shared publicly in one location. The University of Texas at Arlington was already implementing many of these reforms, and a quick Internet search through nearly any university web site will turn up syllabi and professors' credentials. A search on the University of Texas web site turned up syllabi dating back to 2000.

Posting department budgets will represent a milestone in the quest for greater transparency and accountability. Texas university operating costs have risen more than 60 percent in the last two decades, even after allowing for inflation, and the public deserves to see where these costs are going.

Faculty members at public universities are public employees. To suggest that professors be shielded from public examination — and exempt from the most basic accountability measures - lacks credibility.

Professors are among the highest-paid public employees in our state, with salaries increasing at twice the rate of inflation over the past 10 years. [TexasBudgetSource.com](#) - the Texas Public Policy Foundation's web site on government transparency - reports that many of our highest-paid professors teach very few students.

Other critics attempt to undermine these reforms through apparently unsubstantiated claims of technology costs. Case in point: Martyn Gunn, a vice provost at Texas A&M, was quoted in a July 11 Houston Chronicle article saying reforms could cost "a couple of hundred thousand dollars" to implement.

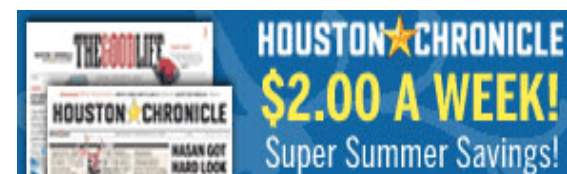
I subsequently asked the university to document this cost estimate. After waiting two weeks, they provided an e-mail exchange between Gunn and university staff dated July 13 - two days after Gunn spoke with the media - that only showed a rough \$47,488 budget estimate. If the university's response to me is accurate, there was no cost estimate before I requested it.

As anyone working at the state Capitol has experienced, state agencies resisting legislative reforms trot out exorbitant cost estimates that gold-plate proposed solutions. However, the Legislative Budget Board - our state's official nonpartisan cost estimator - issued a report saying there was "no significant fiscal impact" from this legislation. Its report noted that each major university was contacted during its examination of the costs, including those universities now making expensive cost claims.

This game of hide-the-ball mirrors all efforts towards greater government transparency. As documented in case studies on [TexasTransparency.org](#) and [TexasBudgetSource.com](#), those organizations implementing reforms report much lower costs than those resisting reforms.

HB 2504 neither infringes upon academic freedom nor imposes large costs. It allows the public, students and parents to see where and how tax dollars and tuition are being spent. As former University of Pennsylvania professor Erin O'Connor put it when describing this new law, "academia exists to serve the public good, and academic freedom does not mean freedom from accountability."

Keener is vice president of policy and communications for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a nonprofit, free-market research institute based in Austin.



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