

## Justin Keener, guest columnist: Public universities owe taxpayers an accounting

JUSTIN KEENER Guest columnist

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Texans like to keep a close eye on their government. That's 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 Rep. Lois Kolkhorst was passed unanimously by the Legislature, requiring more openness from our state's public universities.

But no good deed goes unpunished. 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 that "[the] public isn't well enough aware of what we do and who we are to evaluate us."

Just imagine if we applied Moosally's standard to taxes, the justice system or anything else of any complexity. Citizens would be left in the dark anytime a public employee said the taxpayer was not "well enough aware" of their work.

And what treachery did the Legislature undertake to engender this anger? Universities must now post more information online: course syllabi, lecture topic, 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 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 website turns up syllabi and professors' credentials. A University of Texas website turned up syllabi dating back to 2000.

Posting department budgets represents a milestone in the quest for greater transparency and accountability. Texas university operating costs have risen more than 60 percent in the past two decades, even after adjusting 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 state employees, with salaries increasing at twice the rate of inflation during the past 10 years. [TexasBudgetSource.com](#) reports that many of our highest paid professors teach few students.

Critics have undermined reforms through apparently unsubstantiated cost claims. Martyn Gunn, a vice provost at Texas A&M, was quoted in a July 11 Houston Chronicle saying reforms could cost "a couple of hundred thousand dollars." I subsequently filed an open records request for Gunn's cost data.

I was subsequently provided with 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 estimate. If the open records response is accurate, no cost estimate existed before I requested it.

As anyone working at the state Capitol has experienced, state agencies resisting reforms trot out exorbitant cost estimates that gold-plate proposed solutions. However, the state's non-partisan cost estimator, the Legislative Budget Board, issued a report saying there was "no significant fiscal impact" from this legislation.


This game of hide-the-ball is typical of efforts toward greater government transparency. This law 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 requirement, "academia exists to serve the public good, and academic freedom does not mean freedom from accountability."

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