

A&M System grades faculty — by bottom line

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Frank Ashley felt the shifting winds several years ago: As state officials embarked on accountability measures for K-12 teachers, he said, he told his faculty colleagues that public sentiment would eventually demand such measures in higher education.

Now, Ashley, the vice chancellor for academic affairs for the A&M System, has been put in charge of creating such a measure that he says would help administrators and the public better understand who, from a financial standpoint, is pulling their weight.

A several-inches thick document in the possession of A&M System officials contains three key pieces of information for every single faculty member in the 11-university system: their salary, how much external research funding they received and how much money they generated from teaching.

The information will allow officials to add the funds generated by a faculty member for teaching and research and subtract that sum from the faculty member's salary. When the document -- essentially a profit-loss statement for faculty members -- is complete, officials hope it will become an effective, lasting tool to help with informed decision-making.

"If you look at what people are saying out there -- first of all, they want accountability," Ashley said. "It's something that we're really not used to in higher education: For someone questioning whether we're working hard, whether our students are learning. That accountability is going to be with us from now on."

Peter Hugill, the head of the local chapter of a national faculty group, calls the measure simplistic and crude, and views it as an idea spawned from a conservative think tank in Austin that has advocated faculty accountability and has the support of Gov. Rick Perry and the A&M System Board of Regents.

"As being partly paid by the public purse, I believe we owe the public some degree of accountability -- I don't have a problem with that at all," said Hugill, an A&M geography professor and local president of the American Association of University Professors. "What I have a problem with is silly measures."

The project, tentatively called "The Texas A&M University System Academic and Financial Analysis," will be presented to the A&M System Board of Regents, and, when complete, be available to the general public, officials have written in documents.

The Eagle has filed an open-records request for the document. The A&M System has requested a ruling from the state Attorney General's Office on whether it has to release it, citing an exemption from the public information law on the grounds that it's a draft report that "deals with policymaking matters." In an interview, Ashley said officials want to iron out kinks and mistakes before public release.

Ashley said the document, when complete, will be an argument to the "people of Texas" that academia does, in fact, pull its weight.

"I think the first thing this will show is that pretty much every university in the system, pretty much every college, pretty much every department, is pulling its weight," Ashley said. "There might be one or two departments that are running in the red. Overall, we're operating in the black."

The former longtime faculty member on the College Station campus acknowledges that the teaching measurement does not take into account time spent grading papers, helping with research projects, class preparation, advising or any other activity besides formal teaching in front of a classroom.

"All of that, to me, is teaching," Ashley said. "But here's the bottom line: When you tell the public you teach 12 hours, they think you're only working 12 hours a week. If you're on campus, you know you're working much more than 12 hours a week."

Adam Myers, a senior lecturer in the Mays Business School, was one of four faculty members -- including Faculty Senate Speaker Bob Strawser -- who was invited to System Chancellor Mike McKinney's home recently to view the document and provide input on it.

"Any analysis that can enhance the education of students and make the best use of taxpayer money is a good thing for the university," Myers said. "But merely looking at the raw numbers without some analysis of the information that gives one knowledge of why the numbers are the way they are would be insufficient."

A key concern for Strawser was measuring individual faculty members. He noted that he has taught as many as 1,200 students a semester and as few as 50, depending on what his department head assigned him.

"Also focusing on individual faculty members and classes taught does not recognize that much teaching takes place outside of the classroom," he wrote in an e-mail.

Jason Cook, an A&M System spokesman, said McKinney and Board of Regents Chairman Morris Foster will decline to comment on the matter given that the effort is a "work in progress."

A rawer form of the idea was advocated by the conservative think tank the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a group whose board members are major financial contributors to Perry and whose ideas have been embraced by the A&M System Board of Regents.

One of the group's seven "solutions" to higher education reform called for improving "the quality of teaching by providing legislators and governing boards with a simple tool to measure faculty teaching performance." The reform called for dividing the teacher's employment cost by the number of students taught, "and force rank from highest cost per student taught to lowest cost per student taught."

The A&M idea has two major differences.

First, the teaching measurement is based on weighted semester credit hours, units that the state provides funding for based on students' major and level. For instance, the university receives significantly more money from the state for teaching a doctoral science student than a liberal arts undergraduate. And, second, research dollars generated are counted.

"Whether the idea is coming from this group, or it's coming from whoever, once again, the money is coming from taxpayers," Ashley said.

In the past couple of years, a few other ideas pitched by the Texas Public Policy Foundation -- whose board includes Phil Adams, a Texas A&M regent and Bryan businessman who is a major contributor to Perry's campaign fund -- have been implemented at Texas A&M.

One of the other seven reforms, pitched to regents in May 2008, called for offering awards of between \$2,500 and \$10,000 to faculty members based on anonymous student evaluations. A version was implemented at Texas A&M University the following fall and has been expanded to all A&M System campuses.