

Poll: Texans want better college value

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Texans want more for their money in higher education than they're getting, a public opinion survey released Monday by a conservative think tank found.

The Texas Public Policy Foundation's survey of 800 randomly selected Lone Star State voters found public support for more accountability measures, a belief teaching could be improved while cutting costs and the desire to reduce administrative overhead as the most favored choice to deal with budget reductions.

"The results give lawmakers and university officials clear marching orders for how Texans want them to address budget shortfalls and rising tuition costs: put our students first and cut higher education overhead," said Justin Keener, the group's vice president of policy and communications, in a news release.

To brace for the state's budget shortfall -- expected to be as high as \$25 billion -- Texas A&M already has let go hundreds of faculty members and staff, bought out about 100 more, and could cut more depending on the severity of the state's shortfall.

Texas A&M President R. Bowen Loftin said cutting administrative overhead has been a goal since he became interim president in June 2009, noting that he reduced the number of vice presidents from 14 to 10. But he said that Texas A&M has the lowest administrative cost ratio in the state at 4.4 percent.

"We're already a very efficient institution here, and we've become more efficient over the last couple of years by virtue of trying to really work hard to find every opportunity to reduce administrative costs," Loftin said.

He echoed what others, including Interim Provost Karan Watson and State Sen. Steve Ogden, have told faculty members over the last few weeks: Higher education needs to do a better job of explaining itself to the public. To help with that, Loftin and University of Texas at Austin President William Powers have been touring the state, meeting with legislators, prominent alumni and newspaper editorial boards.

"It's very clear that higher education has not done a really good job explaining its values to the state of Texas, the public good it brings," Loftin said. "Perceptions are clearly out there that we're highly inefficient."

The survey, conducted by telephone from Nov. 7-9 by Baseline and Associates, found that:

- * 71 percent of respondents believe public colleges and universities in Texas can improve how they teach students while cutting costs.
- * 73 percent agree that professors should be paid based on how much work they do, especially how many students they teach.
- * 88 percent agree Texas public universities should be required to conduct performance audits.
- * When asked to choose between "educating students" and "conducting research" as the most important purpose of universities, 87 percent selected educating students.

Peter Hugill, a Texas A&M professor and president-elect of the Texas Association of College Teachers, said the research and teaching question was "extremely poorly worded" and called it a "false dichotomy."

"Research is such an important part of the teaching function" at a Tier 1 research university, Hugill said, adding that the two can't be separated. "What I need to bring to my students is the most up-to-date research or I'm not doing my job of educating them."