



Higher Education Quality

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THE ISSUE

Existing incentive structures within universities tend to encourage research over teaching. Further, the way the Legislature funds universities provides incentives for universities to simply enroll students rather than making sure these students actually graduate. Additionally, recent national data suggests college students lack the appropriate level of basic knowledge in American history, government, and economics.

Professors are judged mostly according to their research accomplishments rather than their teaching ability. Predictably, they spend more time on research, often leaving the teaching to graduate students. This pattern dams up the flow of knowledge from full-time professors to students. Despite the prestige that goes with top-tier research university status, the primary mission of universities should be to educate students. Any further promotion of research only takes away from time that should be devoted to teaching.

While most of us expect college students to graduate in four years, the graduation rate after six years at Texas universities is a mere 49 percent. One reason is that current higher education funding formulas encourage universities to enroll students, not to graduate them. Rather than giving universities dollars per enrolled student, the Legislature should consider adjusting the formula so that graduation, i.e., the successful completion of the educational mission, is taken into account. Simply enrolling students in college does nothing to improve their future standard of living or enhance their contribution to the state's economy. A non-graduate is burdened with debt, and little to show for it.

Another area in which universities need to improve quality is in the study of civics. In 2007, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI), a non-profit educational organization, issued a study which found Texas undergraduates fail at civics. Nationwide, 50 universities were surveyed, three of them in Texas —Baylor University, West Texas A&M, and the University of Texas at Austin. About 1,000 Texas freshmen and senior students were given a 60-question multiple choice test on American history and institutions. The test scores are in the table below.

Class	Texas Students	Students Nationwide	Difference
Freshmen	47.9%	51.7%	-3.8
Seniors	50.8%	53.2%	-2.4

As seen above, Texas students performed worse than their peers nationwide. Worse still, just 2.9 percent of their civic knowledge (according to the survey) comes to them in the college classroom. The study also found that undergraduates at these three Texas universities were below the national average in the number of history, government, and economics courses taken during college.

Texas is home to some of the world's most prestigious universities in the world, but particular academic areas need improvement.

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THE FACTS

- ★ The average college professor spends only about 21 percent of their time in the classroom. Research projects and administrative duties fill up the rest. Oftentimes, graduate students pick up this slack, particularly at tier-1 research institutions.
- ★ The six-year graduation rate at Texas universities is only about 49 percent.
- ★ Texas students gain only 2.9 percent of their civic knowledge over the course of their college career.
- ★ Undergraduates at Texas universities are below the national average in the number of history, government, and economics courses taken during college.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ★ Refrain from giving universities any more tax dollars intended to subsidize university research.
- ★ Use student evaluations of faculty results to determine merit-based bonuses.
- ★ Change the funding process for public universities by switching from a university-centered approach to student-centered, graduation-focused funding. By doing so, Texas can create a market in

higher education that incentivizes universities to minimize costs and maximize instructional quality by putting state appropriations in the hands of students who can choose from competing public, non-profit, and for-profit institutions.

- ★ Institute reforms that tie university funding to student success results such as number of degrees issued, student satisfaction, employment outcomes, and student assessments.
- ★ Encourage university regents and other administrators to institute reforms that place more focus on teaching students basic American history, government, economics, and Western Civilization, whether through a standardized test or more course options/requirements.

RESOURCES

Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board Data, <http://www.txhighereddata.org/Interactive/GradRates.cfm#BU>.

Texas Undergraduates Fail at Civics: ISI's American Civic Literacy Survey Results by Gary Scott, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Mar. 2007) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2007-03-PP04-HE2-Civics-Scott.pdf>.

Higher Education Cost Drivers by Elizabeth Young, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Apr. 2009) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2009-04-PP12-HEcosts-ey.pdf>. ★

