

## Testimony to the House Committee on Higher Education

### *Improving Higher Education Transparency*

By Elizabeth Young, Policy Analyst

Chairman Branch and members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to provide you written testimony today. My name is Elizabeth Young and I am the higher education policy analyst at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. I'll be testifying in favor of House Bill 2504 authored by Representative Lois Kolkhorst.

As noted last month in the "Sunshine 2009 Survey of State Government Information Online," Texas is the national leader in open government—the only state ranked in all 20 transparency categories measured. At the state level, the Comptroller's office has a number of transparency initiatives, such as "Where the Money Goes," "Open Books Texas," and "Tracking the Texas Stimulus," that have modernized the way government interacts with its citizens. At the local level, a growing number of cities, counties, and school districts are opting to put their check registers online—a good first step to becoming more transparent and accountable.

Yet in spite of Texas' notable transparency achievements, there are still areas where the state can improve. One such area is higher education. HB 2504 is a necessary step in the right direction and, if passed, would go a long way to shed light on university spending.

About 10 years ago, the Comptroller's office released a study that highlighted the lack of available information:<sup>1</sup>

*Texas invests more than \$1 billion each biennium in public university faculties. These appropriations are the primary source of the "teaching" portion of faculty salaries. Since universities are not held to the same reporting standards as state agencies, little information is available on how successfully universities manage this investment. Of course, it should be recognized that classroom instruction is only part of a college professor's job, which involves research, writing, counseling, and various departmental activities as well. Nevertheless, in-class teaching is*

*an activity state funding directly supports, creating a legitimate state interest in how it is conducted.*

Ten years later, taxpayers still have few tools to learn how universities use their money. In the past eight years, the average operating cost per student has increased by \$3,853, even though state appropriations have remained relatively constant.<sup>2</sup> Making course budgets public would give taxpayers and students much needed insight into how their money is being spent, as well as encourage universities to spend in a more fiscally responsible manner.

In addition to improving fiscal transparency, HB 2504 would also enable students to make more informed decisions when choosing professors and deciding in which courses to enroll. By forcing universities to list a professor's postsecondary education and teaching experience, students will have a more accurate representation of a professor's classroom abilities than they would have otherwise.

Posting "significant professional publications" could also play a role in a student's decision making process. If the student is looking to take an African history course, he would most likely choose a professor who had sufficient knowledge of this subject rather than an African history professor whose research focuses on Russian history. HB 2504 would simply allow students to make more informed decisions throughout their enrollment process, giving them more control over the education for which they are paying.

At its heart, transparency is about educating and empowering taxpayers and consumers so that they can engage in a meaningful debate on important public policy issues and make informed decisions. That's why the Foundation supports Representative Lois Kolkhorst's efforts to promote transparency in higher education. 

<sup>1</sup> A Report from the Texas Performance Review, "Disturbing the Peace: The Challenge of Change in Texas Government," Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts (Dec. 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Marc Levin, "Higher Education Productivity: 2009-2010 Legislators' Guide to the Issues" Texas Public Policy Foundation (Jan. 2009).