



Texas Public Policy Foundation

Center for Higher Education

Texas Legislature's *83rd Session* in Review

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For conservatives, higher education at times appears to be both the least compelling and the most compelling of the issues we confront. It appears least compelling because urgent threats—taxes, regulation, and government expansion generally—threaten us almost daily, whereas higher education battles are long-term and esoteric, with hard-to-quantify results.



But it is also the most compelling because, as conservatives rightly lament, we are “losing the culture.” Universities have become our culture-crafters. Lincoln scholar Harry Jaffa recognized this back in 1959, when he wrote that universities have become “the decisive source of the ruling opinions in our country.” Jaffa predicted that the “utopianism and intolerance” taught in universities “would surely spell the end of constitutional democracy.”

Bearing this in mind, the Foundation approached this session proposing legislation to help raise public awareness of the poor job higher education is performing, that is, legislation that would increase the transparency on which genuine accountability depends.

Transparency and Other Reform Efforts in Higher Education

The Foundation was fortunate to secure passage of its highest-priority bill, the “Informed Student Document,” a transparency bill for which TPPF wrote the model legislation. The bill requires universities to provide prospective students information about the success of the school and its graduates, employing metrics covering comparative tuition costs, average starting salaries, student-loan debt, and graduation rates. This success at arming students and parents with vital comparative informa-

tion is all the more notable given the backdrop of intense legislative recalcitrance toward higher education reform generally.

Another transparency measure for which the Foundation wrote the model legislation, the “Honest Transcript Bill,” would disrupt grade inflation through requiring that student transcripts provide the average grade given for the whole class alongside the individual student’s grade. Though it was passed overwhelmingly by the House, it was not given a hearing in the Senate Higher Education Committee.

Other higher-education reform and transparency measures made some progress through the legislative process. These included:

- the “College Assessment” bill, which would measure and publicize how much students actually learn from four years invested in their Texas public college or university;
- the American History bill, which corrected serious gaps in the current teaching of the subject; and
- a TPPF-championed bill that would have required a feasibility study of a 10-percent cut in university administrative budgets.

Although none of these bills finally passed, the momentum we established portends good news for the future of higher-education reform. Many defenders of the failed education status quo ran from these issues because they judged rightly that, if given a public hearing, our arguments would prove stronger than theirs. The success with the “Informed Student Document” shows this. The information it provides, once publicly disseminated, guarantees that its success will not be our last. ★

