

Texas Public Policy Foundation

Keeping Texas Competitive

A Legislator's Guide to the Issues 2013-2014



Higher Education Quality ★ Keeping Texas Competitive Priority

The Issue

While most of us expect college students to graduate in four years, the average time-to-graduation at Texas universities is 5.3 years. One prominent cause of this disappointing statistic is that current higher education funding formulas overwhelmingly encourage universities to enroll students, but not to graduate them. Nor do they encourage universities to graduate students with an externally verifiable level of competence.

Recent national data suggest that 1) college students lack the appropriate level of basic knowledge in American history, government, and economics; and 2) as a result, they score poorly on tests measuring critical thinking and complex reasoning.

The Legislature took an important step toward remedying this with the passage of HB 9 in 2011. On this important foundation the Legislature should consider building further. Rather than continue to appropriate the bulk of funding on the basis of the number of students enrolled, it should further adjust the formula so that graduation—i.e., the successful completion of the university's central mission—is taken more into account. Students who fail to graduate leave school often burdened with student-loan debt, the repayment of which is made all the more difficult by their lack of a degree.

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 that 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. Nearly 1,000 Texas freshmen and senior students were given a 60-question test on American history and institutions.

Texas students performed worse than their peers nationwide. More troubling still, the survey found that only 2.9% of students' civic knowledge is learned in the college classroom. Texas' comparative deficiency in knowledge of civics is likely explained by another of the study's findings: undergraduates at these three Texas universities were below the national average in the number of history, government, and economics courses taken during college.

These disheartening statistics lend credence to the fear that Texas higher education is far from exempt from the alarming results of a 2011 study of collegiate learning. *Academically Adrift*, published by the University of Chicago Press, employed the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) to measure what our undergraduates are learning in college. Of the students across the country whom it surveyed, 45% showed "small or empirically non-existent" gains in critical thinking capacities after two full years in college. After four years in college, more than one in three (36%) still scored at this low level.

Given the role that history, government, and economics play in developing critical thinking—and the fact that Texas students suffer a comparative disadvantage nationally in the number of such courses taken—we in Texas should be concerned that our students, too, have been cast "adrift." None of this denies that Texas boasts some of the most prestigious universities in the world. Nevertheless, the areas described above need improvement.

The Facts

- The six-year graduation rate at Texas universities is only 58.4%.
- By 2020, 60% of jobs will require a career certificate or college degree.

- Texas students gain only 2.9% of their civic knowledge during their college careers.
- Undergraduates at Texas universities are below the national average in the number of history, government, and economics courses taken during college.

Recommendations

- Institute reforms that tie university funding to student success results such as the number of degrees issued, learning outcomes (as measured by the Collegiate Learning Assessment) and employment outcomes five years after graduation.
- Simultaneous with the above, encourage university regents to institute measurements of learning outcomes at the freshman and senior years, using the CLA.
- 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.
- Building on the foundation laid last year by HB 736 (Sec. 9), improve information systems by giving students input on: student academic performance, graduation rates, post-graduate earnings, percentage of classes taught by part-time faculty, and evidence of post-graduate earnings (from sites like PayScale.com, etc.). Make this information available on a statewide site with a common format, with the site to be administered by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

Resources

Higher Education: Facts at a Glance by Thomas K. Lindsay, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Jan. 2012).

Academically Adrift by R. Arum and J. Roksa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board Data.

Texas Undergraduates Fail at Civics: ISI's American Civic Literacy Survey Results by Gary Scott, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Mar. 2007).

Complete College America "Time is the Enemy" (Sept. 2011).

